Film Quarterly

ROBIN WOOD ON
NARRATIVE PLEASURE

TARKOVSKY: LOST HARMONY

DAUGHTER RITE:
FEMINIST RE-VISION

RESNAIS DE PALMA ARMINAN

CHAPLIN ARAVINDAN ROEG

FALL 1981

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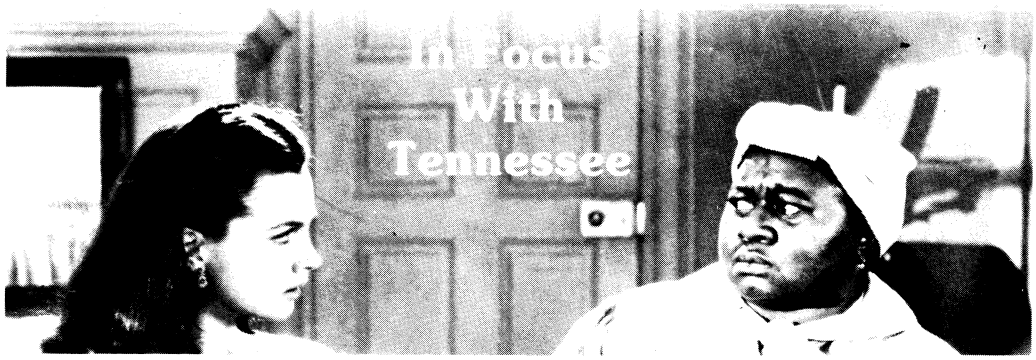

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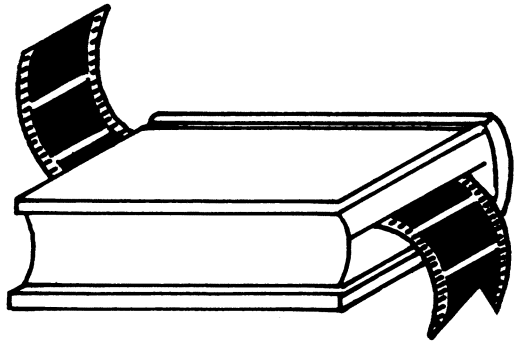

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ROBIN WOOD

Narrative Pleasure: Two Films of Jacques Rivette

Despite the devoted championship of a few critics (outstandingly, Jonathan Rosenbaum), Jacques Rivette's films have yet to establish themselves as a major presence in modern cinema and the development of film culture.* Yet I have come to believe with steadily increasing conviction that they deserve such position, and that every effort should be made to secure for them more adequate distribution and a wider public. That most of the films remain largely inaccessible (either not available or rarely screened) is a great pity for the simplest, most basic reason: that, approached with the right expectations (or, at least, without the wrong ones), the films have an enormous capacity for giving delight. The excitement (both intellectual and emotional) with which my students responded to *L'Amour Fou* and *Céline and Julie Go Boating* was unmistakable: it was the kind of direct response that has nothing to do with trying to please a professor. The films spoke to them immediately and engaged them totally; there was the sense, in ensuing discussion, that whole new potentialities had been opened up.

Those potentialities are intimately bound up, certainly, with the films' narrative freedom and formal innovativeness, but they also transcend the level of formalist experimentation. And, seeing the films again, I must bear witness to a certain dissatisfaction with the emphases of Jonathan Rosenbaum and other Rivette champions (hoping that this does not appear ungrateful: without that championship my attention might never have been drawn to the films). The effect of those emphases has been to create a somewhat abstract impression of the films, repeatedly stressing the importance of their play with narrative but leaving the reader with the feeling that it doesn't matter much what the narratives are *about:* any old narrative would do, as long as its illusionist domination of the spectator is undermined and its classical-realist logic disrupted. Rosenbaum insists at moments on the political force of Rivette's procedures. For example, in his introduction to the indispensable British Film Institute booklet (*Rivette: Texts and Interviews*) we come upon such overt provocation as ". . . there is a great deal more political import to be found in these films—directly addressing the manner in which spectacle and spectator conspire to produce or deny meanings—than in the collected works of such purely unreflexive illusionist directors as Fassbinder, Herzog, Pakula or Rosi." Yet (leaving aside the various tempting questions this raises, as to the felicity of that rather odd list, or the validity of the label stuck indiscriminately on its four incongruous bedfellows) the overall effect of the essay is to reinforce the notion of Rivette as a peripheral formalist experimenter. A *Film Comment* interview (by Rosenbaum, Lauren Sedofsky and Gilbert Adair, Sept.-Oct. 1974) manages to discuss *Céline and Julie* at some length without at any point engaging with it as, centrally and predominantly, a film about women and one of the most radical and positive feminist statements the cinema has yet achieved. (Adair informs us that the film is "open to as many interpretations as there are spectators," a not unfamiliar form of critical abdication, especially in relation to the myth of the "open text"; in this case demonstrable nonsense.) The aim of this article, then, is not only to keep alive the battle for the greater accessibility of Rivette's films, but also to attempt to restore to them the social-political significance and force which Rosenbaum's advocacy tends to obscure.

As a preliminary, one must briefly confront the films' most obvious eccentricity and commercial stumbling-block, their length. (*L'Amour Fou* is 4¼ hours, *Céline and Julie* 3¼; and *Out One: Spectre,* made between them, is—even ignoring the existence of an almost 13-hour version—longer than either.) Why must the films be so inconsiderately long? The simplest, and perhaps most important, answer, is that there *is* no socially acceptable reason: none of the usual pretexts taken to justify the length of, say, *Gone with the Wind, 1900,* or

*Since this article was written, a long and very interesting discussion of *Céline and Julie Go Boating,* by Julia Lesage, has appeared in *Jump Cut.* It seems fair to say that Lesage's article complements my own without making it redundant: though there is much agreement, there are significant differences of approach and emphasis.

L'AMOUR FOU

The Deerhunter operates here. Clearly, the length of our cinema program is closely bound up with the more obvious conditions of the current phase of consumer-capitalism: alienated labor, the five-day week, the 9-5 job, the nuclear family, a norm common to all levels from employee to executive, necessitating that (weekends apart) "leisure" be packed into a 2-3 hour slot between the time the kids are put to bed and the "early night" required by the next day's toil. Otherwise, in one of those ugly and brutal, but entirely taken-for-granted, phrases that characterize our culture, "time is money"; and if we are going to surrender four hours of our "money" to watching a spectacle, we must be repeatedly reassured that the spectacle we are buying was extremely expensive, that we are purchasing a visibly valuable commodity. Rivette's films, on the contrary, are perceptibly cheap—despite their length, they are transparently "low budget" (*Céline and Julie* even shot on 16mm). Nor is the length of the films validated by complexities of plot, large numbers of characters, "epic" events. What is the plot of *L'Amour Fou*? Sebastien tries to produce *Andromaque;* Claire goes mad. Rivette could easily have told it to us in fifteen minutes and spared us the superfluous four hours.

The "unjustified" length of the films, then, represents an act of cultural transgression. The question, "Why this length?," should immediately provoke a reciprocal one: Why the *standard* length? Why should we automatically expect our movies to last between 90 minutes and two hours, feel cheated if they are less and demand particular justifications if they are more? Rivette not only demands our time, he demands our patience. We have to sit through long stretches of film in which nothing much (in terms of the conventional narrative expectations for which mainstream cinema has conditioned us, leading us point by logical point through the traditional process of order-disturbance-restoration/replacement) seems to be happening, or much the same thing seems to go on happening or to happen again. Yet few people who have sat through Rivette's films from beginning to end wish them any shorter. (Some reject them altogether, but even they seem not to question that the length is somehow part of the point, an essential component of the films' "signifying practice," their function within culture.) It is the very fact that the length is *unnecessary* that renders it indispensable. The apparent *longueurs* (the films seem shorter every time one re-sees them) are the

most effective means of forcing us to question the experiences mainstream cinema offers us, the positions in which it places us. As with the question, "Why this length?," the question "Why are we being asked to watch *this*?" raises a reciprocal one: Why are we "normally" asked to watch the particular patterns that "this" transgresses? Further questions immediately follow: What makes a narrative "interesting"? Are we conditioned to apply only very limited criteria of "interestingness"? Can we learn to be interested by other narrative procedures? The issues are radical, and as political as you want to make them.

But I am not, so far, keeping my promise. I have said little more than Jonathan Rosenbaum has said many times: that Rivette's films amount to a radical and disruptive intervention in mainstream cinema on the formal level. In order to go beyond this, and explore questions of what the films are actually *about* and how this relates to (demands) their formal innovativeness, I want to present certain fundamental notions about our culture and the function of art within it—notions that, as soon as they are stated, appear self-evident, yet, like so much that is self-evident, are seldom squarely confronted. (It is only by refusing to confront the self-evident that our culture averts total and immediate revolution.) Our Western culture is, and has been since the beginning of written history, patriarchal: which is to say not just male-dominated but dominated by the figure of the Father, to be understood both literally and symbolically. The father is head of the family, the Pope is father of the church, God the Father presides over all. Our institutions, that both represent and create the social order, are dominated by father-figures (president, judge, chief-of-police, chairman of the board, head of company, etc.) and embody (even if they are occasionally women) the principle of patriarchal authority. The social ordering, then, is the execution of the Law of the Father, and consists of assigning all subordinate groups (women, children, gays . . .) to their "correct" places. Obviously, the specifics of our current cultural situation add to this considerations of race, property and class: the privileged "father" of our society is the adult white bourgeois heterosexual male.

By and large, art, through the ages, has been the illustration, reduplication and reinforcement of this order on the level of ideology; it has also (hence its endless ambiguities) precariously contained the various rebellions against it, the containing dangerously involving an acknowledgement of their existence. Our heritage of art and literature represents (taken *en masse,* as methods of containment) an overwhelming reduplication of patriarchal structures. The traditional notions of art-as-representation and art-as-order can no longer be taken for granted: we have to ask precisely what is being represented (not simple "reality," but a reality culturally defined, from a particular and analyzable perspective) and what order is being imposed or reproduced (not the order of nature, but the order of culture). This reveals a whole new collection of fathers: the artist, the author, the film director: their self-appointed function that of "representing" and "ordering." It is not to belittle the achievements of women in the arts (especially the great women writers—Austen, Brontë, Eliot) to say that, on the symbolic level, the familiar figure of the omniscient author is male. The male author knows everything from the outset, and leads the reader (viewer) by "logical" stages to the privileged position from which he/she can share that knowledge: the knowledge operating both on the narrative/hermeneutic/suspense level of what happened? (traditionally, who got married and who died) and on the level of value structures (who got rewarded and who got punished, and how we are to view these events).

If it is the male who represents, it is the female (though not of course exclusively) who is represented: the artist/model relationship is archetypally a male/female relationship. It would be silly to argue that the whole traditional function of art has been to inscribe women in their places under patriarchy, but this is clearly *one* of its traditional functions, and a major one. With it goes, of course, a whole structure of assumptions about sexuality and sexual relations.

The narrative procedures of progressive, pre-New Wave directors like Renoir and Ophuls (both greatly admired by Rivette) can be seen as tentative steps in that hesitant and uneven, two-steps-forward-one-step-back progress towards liberation that civilization must make if it is to survive. I want to argue that *L'Amour Fou* represents a more decisive step, fusing those procedures, and that *Céline and Julie* is the triumphant celebration of an arrival: albeit an arrival that looks ahead to the further roads to be travelled.

The overthrow (or voluntary abdication) of the male author/director is at once the subject of *L'Amour Fou*'s narrative and enacted in its formal strategies. Crucial to this is its systematic foregrounding of the processes of representation. Its structure resembles a Chinese

box, or one of those Babushka dolls that Claire purchases and dismantles in increasingly desperate fascination; at the same time, the business of representation is no longer the prerogative of a single omnipotent patriarchal figure but divided among a number of representers operating in different media and on different levels. Rivette persuaded Jean-Pierre Kalfon to conceive and rehearse a production of Racine's *Andromaque;* he then persuaded André S. Labarthe (at that time a leading *Cahiers* critic) to make a TV documentary (16mm) on the rehearsals, interviewing the actors about their roles and experiences. Both Kalfon and Labarthe were allowed complete autonomy in producing and directing, while their endeavors remained within the boundaries of fiction: that is to say, there was never serious question of the production of the play actually being staged or of the documentary being shown on television. We have, then, Rivette making a film of Labarthe shooting a documentary of Kalfon producing a play by Racine reinterpreting a Greek myth. It is true that the top level of representation—Rivette's 35mm film—is not called into question, i.e., its mechanics are not foregrounded in the Godardian manner (the showing of cameras, clapperboards, etc., the acknowledgement of the actors as actors), the other levels (where the mechanics *are* foregrounded) being contained within a "realist" fiction. But the film consistently promotes such awareness of representational media that awareness of the film as itself a construct becomes inescapable, simply the logical culmination of the Chinese box structure. The problem of representation (how does one produce Racine? how does one direct actors? how does one film a rehearsal?) is an important component of the film's thematic; on the formal level, the frequent cutting between 35mm and 16mm footage ensures that the spectator's awareness of filmic means is never allowed to lapse for long.

Central to the film is the analogy suggested between Sébastien (Kalfon) as producer and Rivette as film-maker. Sébastien's crisis of confidence in himself—his increasing uncertainty as to what he is doing and his right to do it—is precipitated by Claire's refusal of direction and her withdrawal from the play: each stage in his progressive abdication as controller of the performance is counterpointed with the deterioration of their relationship and Claire's withdrawal into insanity. Sébastien, throughout the film, vacillates between a desire to surrender authority (over the production, over the text, over Claire) and a fear of surrendering it: one might cite his ambivalent attitude to the pop-up toy with which he and Claire play in bed, where he both resents the fact that the toy won't pop up and contemplates (positively) the possibility of a female pop-up toy! His own descent into madness (or a state resembling it) is left ambiguous in its motivation: on one level he voluntarily enters insanity to join Claire, as his only means of retaining contact and helping her; on another, the descent appears a logical consequence of his abdication, a personal necessity, partly a self-punishment (expressed most clearly in the scene where he slashes his clothes and lacerates himself with a razor blade). I know of no other film that so powerfully communicates the terror moving out of one's ideologically constructed, socially conditioned and ratified, hence *secure,* position and identity, into . . . what? Which is precisely the question with which the film leaves one: a *political* question if ever there was one.

L'amour Fou

For a moment, it looks as if both the Claire-plot and the Sébastien-plot are going to be resolved. In so far as his sharing of her madness is an act of therapy, it is successful, but in an unpredictable and ironic way: when she emerges from her insanity it is to the realization that she must leave him. Whereupon he phones his assistant and calls a rehearsal. We are reminded that, whereas *he* abdicated from a clearly defined position as patriarchal organizer, *she* had nothing much to abdicate *from.* But, just as Claire's journey on the train (with which the film begins and ends) has no defined goal, so the first performance never happens. Sébastien (actor as well as producer, hence indispensable to the production) lies slumped on the floor of the apartment, listening to fragments of the record of disintegration on Claire's tape recorder, while the theater audience waits.

In a scene that asks to be read as confessional, on the part of Rivette as well as Sébastien, the latter talks of the intention and status of the production of *Andromque.* He has reached

the conclusion that Racine should be spoken as "conversation," and this emerges in the context as not only a perception about Racine's text but a perception about actors: that each should speak as her/himself, instead of having a uniform style of delivery imposed by the producer. In the event, the production that finally evolves becomes a striking equivalent for the overall method of the film, its idiosyncratic balance/tension between naturalism and formalism: the actors' "conversation," without forfeiting its naturalness, becomes ritualized by the use of a battery of percussion instruments to punctuate the statements.

Sébastien's second conclusion, connected to the first, is that the purpose of the production should be the satisfaction of the participants, rather than of the audience. This is clearly crucial to Rivette's cinema, and appears a direct affront to many traditional "democratic" ideas about art and entertainment: that the prime function of art is communication, that the artist should "respect" her/his audience, that the first consideration is to give the audience what it wants. But Rivette would, I think, reject only the last of these (which marks, in any case, the point where "democratic principle" merges into capitalist exploitation). Indeed, his respect for his audience is shown precisely in the way they are left free to accept or reject what is communicated.

This last point requires clarification. There is a sense in which every spectator is always free: nothing prevents him/her from getting up and leaving the theater, the individual intelligence can say "No" to any effect, any strategy, any moment. Yet most films are not made for the free choices of the individual intelligence. To widely varying degrees (from, say, Renoir and Hawks at one end of the spectrum to Hitchcock and Kubrick at the other) they presuppose a position which they also construct, from moment to moment, from cut to cut. It is very difficult to imagine what totally non-manipulative art might be: supposing that the artist has something (not necessarily a "message" or even a defined world-view) that he wishes to communicate (and why else be an artist?), he/she will always seek ways to establish points, to guide perceptions, to determine judgments. Yet the spectrum of possible degrees is very wide: the position the film defines for the spectator does not have to be (as so much recent film criticism tends to suggest) one of total and helpless passivity, the filmmaker does not have to conceive of his primary function as the determining and limiting of the spectator's response.

L'Amour Fou strikes me as among the least manipulative films I have ever seen. Its length and *longueurs* are one aspect of this. A central principle of traditional art has been economy: the assumption that the "meaning" of the work is given in certain climactic or integrative moments of particular richness and complexity, which the rest moves up to or away from, but to which everything in the work should be seen to be relevant and necessary. (The moment in *The Deer Hunter* where the "one shot" of Robert de Niro's hunting and charismatic mastery becomes the bullet that Christopher Walken fires into his own brain might stand as a superb example). This principle is not lacking in *L'Amour Fou* (one could clearly point to certain scenes, certain events, certain phases in the narrative, which are of obvious structural/thematic significance, where "things come together"), yet its dominance is significantly challenged. The structuring "moments" are not signalled in the ways to which we are accustomed, and there might be more than usual disagreement as to precisely which moments they are. We are allowed an unwonted degree of freedom in terms of where we find significance, what weight we give to various actions, speeches, gestures, how we distinguish between the important and the trivial. (The great exception to this, Sébastien's walk through the streets towards the end of the film, marked by subjective shots and overwrought music, culminating in his self-confrontation in a mirror-window, has always troubled me, its rupturing of the film's overall tone and method seeming arbitrary and unproductive).

L'Amour Fou, despite the fact that Sébastien and Claire are given roughly equal screen time, remains essentially centered on the male. Throughout, it is the male who acts, the woman either being passive and helpless or acting ineffectually and futilely (e.g., the attempts to buy or steal a basset). The inequality is reflected in the film's formal procedures: the sequences involving Claire are necessary 35mm footage directed by Rivette (however much interpretative freedom was given Bulle Ogier), with no equivalent for the foregrounding of representation in the rehearsal scenes. The pattern of male action/female passivity is broken only by Claire's two *negative* decisions: to leave the play at the beginning of the film, and to leave Sébastien at the end. (The decisions can be seen as positive in so far as they are necessary steps towards Claire's liberation, but both take the form of rejection rather than affirmation.)

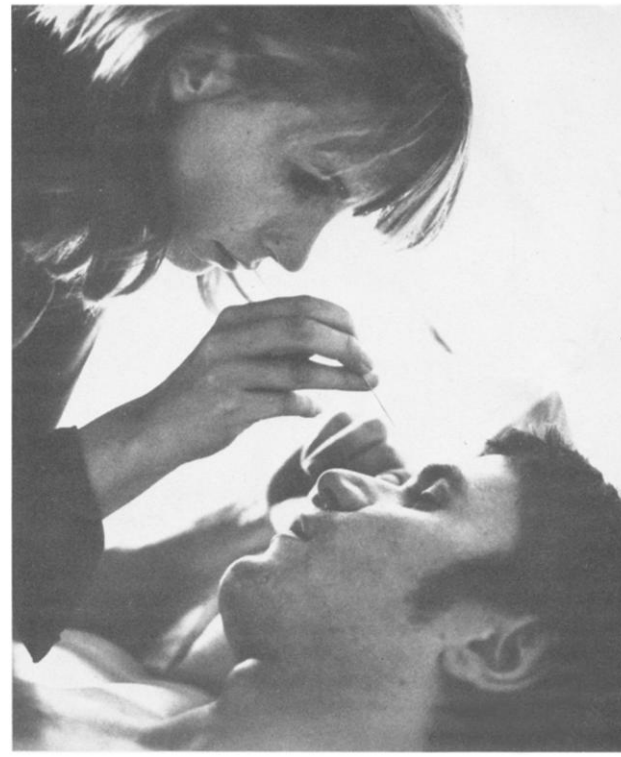
L'Amour Fou is structured on the Sébastien/

Claire opposition: the two central characters are opposed throughout, the central conflict is between *them. Céline and Julie Go Boating* is structured on a very different set of oppositions which unite the two central characters and pit them against the weight of the past, the weight of ideology. It is not coincidental that the central characters of *L'Amour Fou* are male and female while those of *Céline and Julie* are both women. The film might be seen as fulfilling, and at the same time surpassing, what we may deduce that Ophuls would have done with *La Femme de Paul:* here, women become fully autonomous, and it is they who decide and determine the action and its outcome, both as characters and as actresses.

The credits attribute the scenario to Juliet Berto (Céline), Dominique Labourier (Julie), Bulle Ogier, Marie-France Pisier and, finally, Rivette, with di Gregorio acknowledged as dialogue-writer: the women worked out their own roles and between them decided the whole progress of the film, Rivette providing only a suggested starting-point. The distinction between actresses and characters is continually blurred—we often have the sense that Céline and Julie are constructing the film out of their imaginations. In place of the traditional reading process whereby we decipher a previously constructed work in order to arrive at and share the author's privileged position of knowledge, we share here, to an unwonted degree, in the process of construction, the division between that and the process of reading becoming narrower than in any earlier fiction film I can think of. At the same time, the traditional reading process is foregrounded in Céline and Julie's attempts to decipher the story within the "house of fiction": they become readers of a novel, spectators at a play, the audience in a movie theater (debating, at one point, whether or not there should be an intermission, and deciding against it)—an audience miraculously given the power to intervene in the action and change its predetermined outcome.

The film is structured on a systematic series of oppositions between the Céline/Julie story and the story within the house; simply to trace these oppositions is to make explicit the film's meaning.

1. *"Reality" vs. Fiction.* The film creates a "reality" that is more fantastic than the events in the "house of fiction": the paradox is central to its significance. Its "reality" easily accommodates the supernatural, the fanciful, the inconsequential; its fiction, though presented in fragments, is governed by the laws



L'amour Fou

of classical realist narrative (plausibility, character consistency, etc.) and has no room for the illogical or for magic (except in so far as the characters in the house are ghosts from the distant past). The fragmentation (we, along with Céline and Julie, at first get only flashes of the story, and have to piece it together like a jigsaw) effectively destroys the illusionist power of realist fiction, while the magical nature of the film's "reality" undermines the dominance of ideological norms based on assumptions and "common sense." The events within the house are not merely fictitious but "literary," adapted from works by an illustrious male author, Henry James, a novelist noted for formal perfection, conscious and deliberate artistry, and the systematic suppression of an overt authorial viewpoint; Céline and Julie (Berto and Labourier) invent their own fiction/reality, foregrounding the process of construction.

2. *Present vs. Past.* The characters in the house—apart from the child Madlyn—are the "living dead" (the parallels with Romero's zombies may not be immediately obvious but, once noted, are extremely suggestive). They represent the past that hangs over the present (its structure of values, as recorded in its literature): the legacy of ideology. Céline and Julie create their present *against* this past, in the process destroying its power. The characters in the house (all of whom wish the child dead and are her potential murderers) are governed entirely by the inherited assumptions of patri-

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Life in the house.

archy; Céline and Julie (whose single-minded endeavor is to *save* the child) reject those assumptions and look towards a future of liberated, autonomous beings—necessarily much less clearly defined.

3. *Spontaneous vs. Staged.* Rivette has made it clear that, by the time shooting began, the film was thoroughly scripted. Nonetheless, it sets up a clear distinction between the free, impulsive, spontaneous behavior of Céline and Julie (whose scenes are consistently played to give the impression of improvisation), and the extremely stylized, "acted" behavior (literary dialogue, theatrical movements and delivery) of the people in the house. Céline and Julie are marked as "free," able to invent their own lives; the "house" characters are imprisoned in a predetermined performance, their lines given them by an author, their attitudes and actions determined by the dominant ideological assumptions. This is underlined by the repetition of lines, gestures, scenes: they are actors trapped in a perpetually repeated play, ghosts doomed forever to reiterate their life's misdeeds, puppets of ideology.

4. *Freedom vs. Entrapment.* Céline and Julie have free movement: they come and go as they please, the apartment is simply a place to eat, sleep and be together. Sophie, Camille and Olivier, on the other hand, never go outside the house: their lives are circumscribed by its walls. The house, all the inhabitants of which plot against each other, compete with each other, essentially hate each other, recalls Sartre's *Huis Clos;* it might also be seen as itself the symbol for the dominant ideology ("the house we live in"—or wish to move out of and see demolished).

5. *Autonomy vs. Marriage.* Céline and Julie reject marriage, and with it the assumption that a woman is defined, given her meaning, through her relationship to a man. In one sense, Céline takes Julie's place when Julie's childhood sweetheart Guilou returns to resume their "ideal" relationship. Guilou wants everything a man is supposed to want of a woman: a wife/mother (they are both dressed in virginal white) and a whore (the obscene dialogue). Céline (as Julie) leaves him literally with his pants down. In the house, on the other hand, marriage is the supreme aim: the entire "house of fiction" plot is centered on the two

women's efforts to capture Olivier as husband, their only means of securing an identity for themselves.

6. *Female-centered vs. Male-centered.* Céline and Julie control their own lives, driving out all the manifestations of male domination. The scene in which Céline takes Julie's place to annihilate Guilou is balanced/answered by the scene in which Julie takes Céline's place in the night club and denounces (in a moment surely derived from *Dance, Girl, Dance,* but carried further) the managers and customers who want to objectify women as sexual images for the male gaze. In the house, although the actions are mostly initiated by the women, it is the "passive" male who determines them and gives them their aim. Olivier dominates everything not through any force of personality but simply by his position as patriarch, the women's motivation residing solely in the desire to become his next wife. Camille and Sophie habitually construct themselves as objects for his gaze, in their modes of dress and make-up, their calculated poses, their facial expressions; their activeness is repressed and perverted into intrigue and manipulation. The Céline-Julie relationship, on the contrary, represents a celebration of women's activity, of unrepressed, open and directed energy. Their beauty is of a quite different order from that of Camille and Sophie, marked as natural, non-constructed—the beauty of women being themselves, for themselves.

7. *Telepathic Communication vs. Suspicion and Distrust.* If Céline takes Julie's place to "ruin" her chances of marriage, and Julie Céline's in order to lose her the chance of a job, we are not to read these actions in terms of underhandedness or betrayal. Rather, we are led to believe that each is simply executing the other's real wishes, because she knows what those wishes are and is better able to fulfill them: each frees the other from a possible entrapment in the dominant patriarchal order. Repeatedly in the film the existence of a magical, telepathic communication is confirmed. We may wonder whether Céline and Julie represent two sides of the same personality, or simply the togetherness, and instinctual mutual understanding of needs, of revolutionary women sick of the tyranny of the male.

In the house (the imaginary "real" world of bourgeois ideology), on the other hand, there is no direct communication at all, only subterfuge, deception, manipulation, paranoia. Everyone plots against everyone, all interpersonal communication (which requires, as its basis, the *desire* to communicate) is blocked. By juxtaposing the action in the house with the Céline/Julie relationship, Rivette realizes the potential of James's fiction to be read as a devastating critique of heterosexual relations under patriarchal capitalism.

8. *Friendship vs. Enmity.* Céline and Julie, not without hesitation and difficulty, establish as close a togetherness as is compatible with the preservation of personal autonomy. In the house, the women can never be friends: they are divided forever by their competition for possession of the male, their only access to power. It is the ideological dominance of the male that divides them, makes friendship impossible—as it has sought to do to women through the centuries, a point repeatedly confirmed throughout the classical cinema.

9. *Childishness vs. "Maturity."* This is perhaps the film's most problematic aspect. Throughout, Céline and Julie behave like children: how do we, as adults, accept them as embodying a new (even if tentative) ideal? But the house presents the alternative: "maturity" is an ideological concept, built on the norms of patriarchy. According to the ideal those norms are meant to embody, the "mature" man takes possession of the woman, becomes in his turn the father; the "mature" woman acquiesces in the patriarchal structure, becomes the wise, kind mother. The very concept of "maturity," that is to say is an aspect of the oppression of women (and of gays) in our culture: "maturity" as we know it is heterosexual-male-defined. Olivier, the patriarch, complacently passive at the center of things, is mature; Camille and Sophie, desperately competing for his favors, ready to murder a child to achieve their glorious end, hating each other (and really themselves) while pretending affection, are mature. On the other hand, Céline and Julie, unattached, not needing man for their self-definition, loving and accepting, the rescuers of the child the mature people wish to kill, are themselves children. Both sets of characters play games, in somewhat different senses: Céline and Julie play for fun and intercommunication, from a delight in togetherness; the "games" of Camille and Sophie are surreptitious (emblematized by the traditional game of "Grandmother's Footsteps" at the party).

The implications of all this are enormous and profoundly disturbing. How (if we accept the principles of women's liberation, or simply of "liberation," to which the liberation of women is obviously crucial) are we to relate to the past and its works, which are the products of patriarchy and necessarily structured by its

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values? The use of Henry James in the film suggests one way, at least, in which the works of the past can still be used (other than as "academic" curiosities or historical documents reiterating discredited patterns): for their exposure of the impossible tensions, the impossible strain on human relations, that the patriarchal order entails.

And one traditional figure of long standing is at once recuperated into the film and partially re-thought: the Romantic image of the Child as symbol of the future, of hope, of new life, of possible transformation (a figure whose literary history is cogently documented by Peter Coveney in his *Image of Childhood*). Madlyn acquires complex connotations in the course of the film. She is to be seen, first and foremost, as a real child, treated by her "loving" relatives as a disposable pawn in their power game, treated by Céline and Julie as a person, without condescension or sentimentality. But she is also linked to the childhood of both women. In physical appearance she strikingly resembles Céline, and could easily be taken for Céline-as-child; Julie's conversation with her old nurse reveals that the child in the house next door who became sick and disappeared (Madlyn in the past) was just the same age as Julie. Madlyn, then, is the child within the two women—the healthy, growing part of themselves which they rescue from entrapment within patriarchal ideology.

I want finally to consider the film's limitations and the nature of its achievement. I am not certain whether, at this stage of the evolution of society (and of Feminism), one should speak of "limitations," or simply of the conditions that make the film possible. One objection that I have encountered (interestingly, from men), that the depiction of Céline and Julie draws lavishly on thoroughly traditional myths of "the feminine" (the association of women, explicit or implicit, with cats, witches and children), can, I think, be turned to the film's advantage. The argument of Feminism is not that there are no such things as "feminine" characteristics, but that (a) under patriarchy they have been misrecognized and undervalued and (b) they should not be regarded as the *exclusive* prerogative of women, but as potentially common—perhaps to differing degrees—to both sexes. The aim would be, then, not simply to reject the myths, but to cleanse them of their pejorative connotations and question the use to which they have been put—the construction of Woman as "the other." Men, for example, have traditionally claimed "reason" for themselves, established it as the superior quality, and compensated women (condescendingly) by according them "intuition." One may certainly argue that men lose as much as women from the insistence upon such a dichotomy. The answer, then, would not be to deny the existence of "intuition" altogether, but to revalue it. In the film, Céline and Julie consistently use their intelligence, but never at the expense of magic. The film's supreme moment triumphantly endorses "magic" over the "moronic logic" of the laws of narrative, by finally breaking down the boundaries between "reality" and "fantasy": the moment where, after the last "dream" of rescuing Madlyn from the house, Céline and Julie wake up to discover that the child is indeed there with them in the apartment. It is one of the great liberating moments of cinema: the moment that allows Céline and Julie to "go boating," and to pass the ghosts, now stiffened into total paralysis, drifting downstream (back to the past) as the women row Madlyn upstream towards the future.

One may be more legitimately worried by the film's treatment of men and of the possibility of heterosexual relationships; yet, again, perhaps it is simply acknowledging a particular phase of social evolution. Women have always been oppressed, but now (though the oppression continues, with minimal "liberal" modifications) they *know* they are oppressed. The difficulties of the heterosexual relation within the existing economic/ideological structure (a structure which *depends* on women's subordination) have become (as most of my women friends repeatedly testify) almost in-

superable: even men who can intellectually grasp and accept the notion of woman's autonomy gradually reveal enormous problems with it emotionally. Our culture may have to go through a phase (when the current period of general but uneasy and unconvincing reaction ends and the next wave of Feminism gathers power) wherein the close ties are same-sex, until new modes of male-female relationships are hammered out. Yet this does not satisfactorily excuse or explain the film's total withdrawal of sympathy from the male: all the men in it are permitted to exist only on the level of parody, denied even a moment of grace, forgiveness or understanding. (Interestingly, this trait is reflected in certain recent pop-Feminist movies such as *Private Benjamin* and *Nine to Five*).

On the other hand, the film's treatment of Lesbianism is curiously equivocal. With her (male and female) friends in the bar, Céline explicitly rejects any suggestion that she and Julie relate sexually ("She's not a dyke"); yet it is unmistakably implied that the two women share the same bed. One has the choice of interpreting Céline's remarks as just her way of dealing with casual acquaintances who "wouldn't understand," or of seeing the women's relationship as pre-sexual, the affectionate romping and cuddling of schoolgirls (not that that, of course, is without sexual connotations—the question is of the extent to which these are acted upon). Having dared so much, the film might have dared further: to give us one of the first positive images of Lesbianism in the history of narrative cinema—an option it leaves for Bruce Beresford and his remarkable *The Getting of Wisdom.*

Nonetheless, the film constitutes an extraordinary and forward-looking achievement. Before it was shown in my film study course, the students were debating as to whether radical (as opposed to liberal) Feminism were compatible with "entertainment," and the general tendency was to conclude that it isn't: the codes that govern entertainment, the long-established habits of patriarchy, with their traditionally defined "ways of seeing" and their reliance on culturally constructed images of masculinity and femininity, would directly conflict with everything a Feminist film-maker wished to achieve. This diagnosis seemed confirmed by Laura Mulvey's seminal article in *Screen,* "Narrative Form and Visual Pleasure," and also—somewhat depressingly—by the practice of the Mulvey/Wollen *Riddles of the Sphinx. Riddles*—and especially its sustained center-piece, "Louise's story told in thirteen shots"—is challenging and theoretically interesting, but our notions of "pleasure" would have to be redefined beyond recognition before the film could be claimed as "entertainment." The impression one took from the Mulvey/Wollen intervention was of a choice between mindless surrender to the addictive and reprehensible pleasures of mainstream cinema on the one hand, and sheer cerebral hard work on the other. *Céline and Julie*—in the context of the progressive narrative tradition I have described—at the very least suggests ways of breaking this impasse. This is not to assert that the film is accessible within mass culture. Yet, while never pandering to ingrained habits, while systematically deconstructing and exposing the dominant codes of narrative, characterization and presentation, *Céline and Julie* engages its viewers in a narrative play that permits identification, fun, suspense, emotional involvement; it allows, indeed encourages, pleasure; one can describe it as intensely entertaining, without stretching the customary meaning of the word beyond breaking-point.

To conclude—and to consolidate this note of hope for the future of narrative—I want to return briefly to the comparison I threw out earlier with *Dawn of the Dead.* Romero's film is formally more conservative, more traditional, than Rivette's, though extremely auda-

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cious in the context of the contemporary commercial cinema (it was, of course, produced independently). The logical corollary is that it also cannot proceed as far in its thematic development, in terms of a revolutionary break with the past. Nonetheless, beside today's weary rehashes of the attitudes and narrative procedures of the Hollywood past, it stands as a reminder of the degree to which traditional narrative can be bent and stretched into progressive forms.*

The parallels between the two films are striking. Like the occupants of the "house of fiction"—though in a less elaborated and complex way—Romero's zombies, mindlessly gravitating to the shopping mall, represent the habits of the past from which the living characters must strive to extricate themselves (the make-up of the ghosts in the last part of Rivette's film, as they lose their potency, is almost identical). The film never reaches anything comparable to the positive image of women in *Céline and Julie*, but it follows Fran's development as she progressively casts off the entrapments of patriarchy: notions of the woman as inferior, as helpless, as irrational, as passive; the acceptance of herself as an image for the gaze of the male; crucially, the idea of marriage as norm. At the end of the film the emblems of male power are either transferred to the woman or surrendered (Fran flies the helicopter, the surviving male relinquishes the rifle to the zombies). The film even offers an equivalent for the rescue of Madlyn in Fran's unborn child, carried out of the clutches of the past towards an uncertain and precarious future. There is also, throughout the film, a strong element of play, in the stylized comic-strip violence, in the film's awareness of itself as genre movie, as fantasy: the audience is invited to participate in a macabre and bloody game that manages to remain, by virtue of the stylization, at once fundamentally serious and good-humored.

It is clear that the most audacious and radical films will continue to be made outside the commercial mainstream. Yet the co-presence in seventies cinema of *Céline and Julie* and *Dawn of the Dead* suggests the possibility of significant parallel developments in different spheres of independent film-making, at different removes from the mainstream. Our delight in story-telling and story-hearing, while it needs to be carefully scrutinized, does not have to be abandoned.

*Further, I would not be prepared to assert that *Céline and Julie* is the greater film, a caveat that may offset any temptation to misread one as seeking to establish formal innovation as an *absolute* criterion of excellence.

MICHAEL DEMPSEY

Lost Harmony

Tarkovsky's *The Mirror* and *The Stalker*

The vagaries of distribution, and probably politics, brought Soviet director Andrei Tarkovsky's two most recent films, *The Mirror* (1974) and *The Stalker* (1980), to Filmex this year simultaneously, despite the gap between their original release dates.

It is hard to think of a widely admired filmmaker who seems more enigmatic than Tarkovsky. Partly, this stems from the rarity of Russian movies on American screens, though maybe the recent art-house successes of *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (surprise winner of 1981's Oscar for Best Foreign Film) and of *Oblomov* will loosen up the situation a bit. Tarkovsky's first feature, *My Name Is Ivan* (*Ivan's Childhood*) played some American dates during the early sixties, when "art movies" were an exotic genre unto themselves here, but it has seldom been revived since then. A cut version of *Andrei Roublev* (1966) has been appearing from time to time in occasional museum or one-night theater showings lately; and *Solaris* (1972), likewise cut, has become a fixture in the cult circuit and among sci-fi lovers. Few Americans, then, can have seen his films often enough to evaluate them confidently; fewer still seem to have knowledge of enough contemporary Russian movies to place

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them in any adequate context. Added to which, we have the vague stories that float out of Russia from time to time about Tarkovsky's "difficulties" with the Soviet establishment, which is said to object to his style of movie-making, supposedly because his style and concerns are too rarified for the "masses" who, the cliché has it, must be appealed to with the clear-cut, propagandizing "boy-meets-tractor" epics of Socialist Realism. The long years between Tarkovsky's productions, the rationale for letting him work at all despite all these objections by the government, the arrangements between him and the authorities—we remain in the dark about all these, even after accounts by Westerners with good Russian contacts, like Herbert Marshall and Ivor Montagu (*Sight and Sound,* Spring 1976 & Spring 1973).

But even if all these mysteries cleared up tomorrow, Tarkovsky would still have an aura of the enigmatic, the intractable, the ineffable about him. Like his closest Western counterpart, Stanley Kubrick, he tends to make what Gene Youngblood once called "trance" films, characterized by slow, dreamlike pacing created with large, static tableaux, stately camera movements, and an extensive use of classical music. Instead of the Marxist certainties promulgated by the rulers of his country, Tarkovsky pursues a degree of uncertainty, which can be called mystical or merely vague, depending on your outlook. Implicitly, his style and his concern with large abstractions like Love and Nature deny that materialism and rationality can explain everything. His taste for cosmic mystery has a religious tinge which makes him comparable to Alexandr Solshenitzyn, except that he replaces the writer's overbearing nineteenth-century Russian Orthodoxy with a mistier, virtually oceanic pantheism and humanism.

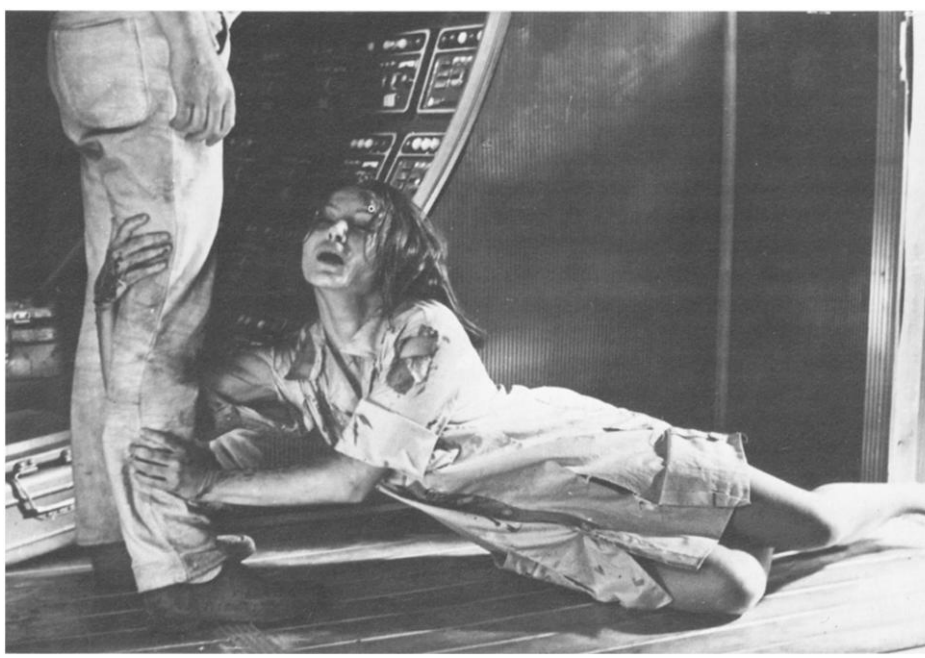
All by themselves, words like these might seem to be describing an impossibly dewy-eyed naif. But Tarkovsky is almost always able to ground his preoccupations in poetic, tactile images. The early shots of the anomic astronaut in *Solaris,* staring at grasses as they ripple hypnotically beneath the surface of a pond, could be his signature shots; the mesmerizing, balletic sway of the grasses bears witness to a powerfully infectious belief in the natural world as the embodiment of a primal peace which we can regain. This vision of lost harmony is what haunts every aspect of Tarkovsky's work, from his choice of colors to his liking for entranced tracking shots through forests to his recurring interest in the commingled joys and sorrows of memory. His expansive crane shots of the steppe where a teenage boy attempts to cast a mighty bell, in *Andrei Roublev,* or that film's final shift from black-and-white for the brutality and loneliness of medieval Russia to color for the vivid icons of the almost unknown title character express a heroic optimism about the force of artistic expression arrayed against all the forms of dark powers in the world. Similarly, although the memory-releasing ability of the planet Solaris unbalances the scientists who work there by conjuring up phantasms from their tormented pasts, it also enables the strongest of them to purge himself of numbing alienation from life. When the astronaut's late wife, who had killed herself over intractable problems with the marriage, reappears as a floating ghost, her very movement through the air, eerily soft and lovely, and the delicate beauty of actress Natalie Bondarchuk are Tarkovsky's means of imbuing us as well as his deadened hero with revivified pleasure in existence. At his best, Tarkovsky is enraptured, as much by movies as by his favorite abstractions, which is why he is able to prevent them from drying out into mere abstractions. He is a kind of Walt Whitman, with a sense of moonstruck awe instead of a barbaric yawp.

But something has changed in *The Mirror* and *The Stalker;* the Tarkovsky spirit of struggling but finally soaring hope has clouded. In these films, he works with much the same material as before. With its collage of memories from a boy's rural life with his abandoned mother, plus concurrent newsreels of World War II, the Stalin era, and more recent times, *The Mirror* reworks and expands the earth-bound aspects of *Solaris,* which are marked by marital and father-son agonies in a pristine natural setting. *The Stalker,* contrasting a silted-over, trashed-out urban society with the allure of a mysterious, cordoned-off natural wonderland known as The Zone, is viewable as a contemporary companion piece to *Andrei Roublev,* which presents equally sharp contrasts between dazzling landscapes and the barbaric wounds inflicted on their inhabitants in the name of what passes for civilization. But in *The Mirror,* the broken home, the lost loves remain irretrievable, both in fact and through any form of contemplative consolation, including the artistry which brings them back to life for us. And in *The Stalker* the promise of The Zone—that a Room somewhere in its midst can make one's profoundest wishes come true—is not merely betrayed, it is pathetically betrayed, leaving the horrors of pollut-

ing modernity dominant and the battered title character clinging to the remnants of his quest for transcendence.

Herbert Marshall's account of how Soviet authorities and several of Tarkovsky's fellow directors reacted when they first saw *The Mirror* has them all complaining about its obscurity, its refusal (or its inability) to make itself easily understood by a mass audience. For different reasons, naturally, they all sound amazingly like baby moguls in Hollywood scratching their heads over this artsy whacko who, if you can believe it, doesn't like money. However, wrong reasons or not, they are right in their basic observation; *The Mirror* is an extremely puzzling film. The looking glass that it offers us is not merely cracked but shattered, and we are seeing the jagged, jumbled reflections of its scattered shards. Tarkovsky begins this 90-minute montage of memories, stock footage, and fantasy with black-and-white shots of a stuttering boy whom an offscreen therapist is trying to cure with hypnosis. As the boy fights his recalcitrant tongue and finally breaks through to coherent speech ("I can speak!"), we suppose that he will turn out to be the focal figure of the movie. But he never reappears; his predicament and his victory over it are evidently meant to be metaphorical. The problem is, to extend the metaphor in a way that Tarkovsky probably did not intend, that the film's eruptions of semi-disconnected, non-narrative scenes feel like the boy's stutter yet do not break through to his final burst of clarity. *The Mirror* finally speaks only dimly because nobody, nothing quite manages to take this boy's place as either an organizing principle or a center of consciousness.

Tarkovsky tries to place another boy, Ignat, in this role. Evidently a surrogate for himself, Ignat lives with his mother during the World War II years in a small cabin-like home near a meadow, surrounded by luxuriant trees and other greenery which become seedbeds of his memories. These, in turn, reach us partially via narrated comments by a male voice which appears to represent the grown-up Ignat/Tarkovsky. Breaking into them further are occasional quotations from the poems of Tarkovsky's father, who (as fictionalized in the film) has left Ignat's mother, disgusted with his failure at the age of forty to escape what he considers his innate mediocrity as a writer. In addition, shots of the Spanish Civil War, the sufferings of bedraggled Soviet troops struggling against the Nazi invaders, and hero-worshipping Chinese crowds acclaiming Mao jump in and out of the film's imagistic flow. Sometimes immediate connections between this archival material and the other shots are instantly obvious, as when Tarkovsky shows us children in Spain forcibly placed aboard trains for removal from war-torn areas or dead soldiers dangling from tree-caught parachutes. And even when a specific reason for this or that piece of editing does not leap promptly to mind, we can view the newsreel footage in a general way—as, for instance, History, in contrast to the rest of the movie, which may be taken to represent what the capital H always

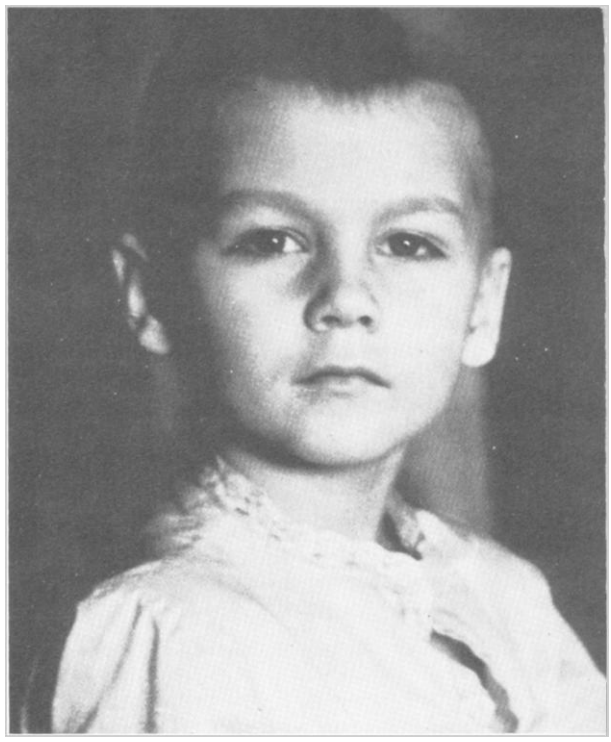


Natalie Bondarchuk in SOLARIS

fails to encompass of human existence. But this "generality" (this blurriness, in fact)—which extends to Tarkovsky's use of two actresses, one young, the other (his actual mother) old to portray Ignat's mother—eventually overcomes the film, leaving it a tantalizing but unknit collection of "haunting" shots.

But, leaving aside judgments like this one, which is based on only one look at the film, *The Mirror* is approachable as a thesaurus of Tarkovsky's past interests and the darker light that he is throwing on them here and in *The Stalker.* Again, he focuses on the breakup of family life, expressed here as an impacted mass of reveries (a neighboring house bursting into flames repeatedly, slow-motion shots of rain pouring into Ignat's home and his mother wallowing ecstatically beneath the debris that the water brings crashing down), like mental loops. Although Tarkovsky is aware of family life's psychic strains and repressions, he continually returns to it as a source of both loving intimacy and poetic imagination—which, of course, may make him as suspect in certain American circles as he may be with the Russian film establishment. Ignat's mother he makes as luminous an icon of mercurial beauty and persistent devotion as the resurrected wife of *Solaris.* The first image of her, as a young woman sitting on a fence and gazing out over a glorious meadow, is characteristic, almost a John Ford shot of the Woman Who Waits. Later, a co-worker at the printing plant where she works (ever fearful, like everyone else, of a printing mistake which might land everybody in political trouble) accuses her of being too independent, and others chime in that they are surprised her husband stayed with her as long as he did. But Tarkovsky saves a big close-up for her dismissal of these comments. Obviously, he is fascinated by the dignity that he perceives in the figure of the abandoned wife. Yet he cannot (or so one viewing makes it seem) clarify the repeated failures of his men to deal straightforwardly with these examples of female grace. *The Mirror* suggest that Ignat as an adult is replaying his father's infidelity, yet it is hard to grasp why (without dragging in one's own speculation), given the almost incandescent idealization of the wife/mother here, which does not carry with it any of the ambiguous charge that so often accompanies the equivalent character in American movies and literature.

The salient emotion at the heart of *The Mirror* appears to be a deep longing for a state of Eden-before-the-Fall innocence and bliss, which Tarkovsky typically locates in exquisite



THE MIRROR

images of natural flux and flow refracted through the prism of childhood, when every detail of daily life, however, commonplace, had an aura of enigma about it. Accordingly, the most resonant moments of this movie are those that capture these jewelled fragments of Ignat's "past recaptured:" a reverie of his mother levitating above her sickbed, a winter bird nesting momentarily in his cap, a sudden squall rising without warning to shake a field and then vanishing just as suddenly, to name just a few. At its best, *The Mirror* does catch the sensation which Tarkovsky's father headily evokes when he writes of "Life's swift needle (which) draws me on like a thread." But because neither Ignat nor his mother nor any other consciousness generates enough force or clarity, this vortex of images finally registers on our own memories like distant, faded recollections from past life (or movies) which, when re-examined, prove to be either distorted or even nonexistent. The result is a pervasive sense of chaos, breakdown, the beauties of the past not crystallized in art but whirling away, unrecaptured and finally extinguished. *The Mirror,* with its pantheistic-lyrical whirlpool of regret and old desire, ends up a beautiful bewilderment.

With *The Stalker*, Tarkovsky has returned to straight-line, though not conventional, story-telling. The hero, a single-minded visionary, sneaks two outlanders (American, like himself, in the film's loose source, a novel called *Picnic by the Roadside,* but evidently

Russian in the movie, though metaphorically All People) into The Zone. They are a Writer and a Scientist, both as anomic as the spaceman of *Solaris* and both, like their guide, nameless. Whatever may have created the Zone and its reputed magic (hints center on a meteor, like one which is said to have crashed into Siberia some years ago), the two wayfarers, each a variation on your basic disillusioned intellectual, are making their foray, past barbed wire and border guards, in the hope that their shaman can lead them to a renewal of sapped faith and vigor. As they proceed over land which proves to have some science-fiction traits, like odorless flowers, for instance, the thought arises that Tarkovsky is presenting us with an elongated (165 minute) episode of "The Twilight Zone." At times, when the Writer and the Scientist fall to discoursing about the roles and the weaknesses of art and science, the parallel with the late Rod Serling's show-ending aphorisms seems even stronger. But the climax of their sortie silences them and these thoughts, when the Room not only proves impotent to live up to its reputation but also turns out to be a near-twin of the Stalker's wretched house, where he ekes out bare subsistence with his wife and their crippled little girl. *The Stalker,* then, is a negative image of both *Solaris* and *Andrei Roublev.* Their journeys through hell end in serenity; here the result is a deepened disillusionment.

The Stalker begins in tinted black-and-white, almost as if there were mildew in the emulsion. Yet the effect is stingingly clear as the camera slowly (*slowly*) moves over the hero and his family as they sleep in their hovel on the fringes of a pollution-spewing modern city (actually located in Estonia). Just as an aura of latent, lyrical possibility emanated from the dacha, the woods, and the meadows in *Solaris* and from the wind-ruffled foliage and vistas of *The Mirror,* the opening sequences of *The Stalker* exude bleakness, rattiness, stagnation like noxious fumes. It is as though the whole world has taken on the character of a weedy, diseased railroad siding. Tarkovsky uses his slow pacing and camerawork to heighten our desire to break out and brave the Zone with his three explorers. This method links him to what Kubrick did with similar pacing in *2001,* which also centers on the lure of exploring the unknown for people mired in mundane life at its most stultifying. All through *2001,* watching apes stumble toward their great discovery of the bone as tool-weapon and astronauts float endlessly through their Jupiter Mission, we long to speed things up, only to be held back by the inexorable measured drift of the film, which will reach its goals in its own good time, not ours. This effect translates directly into cinematic terms the frustrations of exploring in any form (for knowledge or enlightenment as well as new realms)—the dogged labor, the blind alleys, the slowness of discovery, the difficulty of making leaps to new ideas or approaches. This is a primary component of the "trance" style, and Tarkovsky uses it in *The Stalker,* both before and after we and his characters make it into the Zone.

But our arrival there is not like our arrival in Kubrick's Louis XIV room after a slit-scan trip into intergalactic space or, to bring up another comparison that is not as far-fetched as it may seem at first, our arrival in Oz. Both of these are enchanted realms, alive with mystery and promise, hot with blazing colors and weird sounds. But the Zone, even compared to the hellhole from which the Stalker and his companions emerge, is quite unprepossessing, neither beautiful nor especially otherworldly, like the natural wonderlands of *Solaris, Andrei Roublev,* and *The Mirror.* Instead, it looks initially like an ordinary, dowdy wilderness. Accordingly, Tarkovsky brings up the intensity of his color just slightly from the monochrome look of the opening scenes and never makes it ravishing, as he has done in the past. For the Zone, too, proves to be a large illusion. Even though the Stalker, for instance, tries to lay down the law about how his charges must proceed if they are to reach the Room, they violate them several times without coming to any harm. Much of the land proves to be as littered with civilization's garbage as the outer world does; again reversing key images of *Solaris,* Tarkovsky shows us waterways in the Zone choked with junk; even with armed patrols and a fence to protect it, the region cannot remain clean. The trio's long struggle through some kind of subterranean culvert suggests an abandoned subway or sewer system. There is no Yellow Brick Road in the Zone.

What holds this threnody of gloom together and makes it moving is not just Tarkovsky's poeticizing style, though it functions with eerie brilliance throughout the film. It is the image created by Alexander Kaidanovsky in the title role. Looking as though he had just crawled out of a Gulag or an inner city ghetto or some post-cataclysm bomb shelter, this half-demented seer-freak, with a bald head and a contorted face that looks torn from a boulder, is the most vivid human element in Tarkovsky's work

since Natalie Bondarchuk's wife. One weakness of Tarkovsky's allegorizing methods has been the tendency of most of his characters, both their natures and their very faces, to fade in recollection, like most of *The Mirror* and the Stalker's two companions. But Kaidanovsky's face is an icon of pain to place alongside Umberto D. When the Room proves to be sterile, we realize that he has lost absolutely the final glimmer of hope for something resembling a truly human life. His chastened return to the outer world produces one staggering shot of a monstrous factory beside a river, along which he and his family walk in the foreground, while the factory spews masses of putrefaction as if to poison the very universe. Yet Tarkovsky does not pitch him headlong into the utter despondency which seems to await him, for he implies a saving resilience in his crazy, dogged hero, who persists in believing that the Room has redeeming forces yet to reveal. We leave him a certifiable fool, yet perhaps a genuine seer as well.

This is also where Tarkovsky leaves us, poised between the edge of despair's abyss and the compensating incandescence of his images. Their heavy, intoxicating ether works on us even when it is at his most obscure or sententious, like some ancient mariner's spell. It is not a brew for everyone, commissar or capitalist; there is no use in pretending that his brand of work can expect any easier sledding in our commercial film world than in his own totalitarian one. Until we are able to see them more often, these strange pictures—exasperating and fascinating by turns—will remain as enigmatic to us as their maker.

LINDA WILLIAMS
AND B. RUBY RICH

The Right of Re-Vision: Michelle Citron's **Daughter Rite** *

The vast majority of literary and visual images of motherhood comes to us filtered through a collective or individual male consciousness. . . . We need to know what, out of that welter of image-making and thought-spinning, is worth salvaging, if only to understand better an idea so crucial in history, a condition which has been wrested from the mothers themselves to buttress the power of the fathers.

—Adrienne Rich[1]

Perhaps our current responsibility lies in humanizing our own activities so that they will communicate more effectively with all women. Hopefully we will aspire to more than women's art flooding the museum and gallery circuit (and screens). Perhaps a feminist art will only emerge when we become wholly responsible for our own work, for what becomes of it, who sees it, and who is nourished by it. For a feminist artist, whatever her style, the prime audience at this time is other women.

—Lucy Lippard[2]

Within the form of the melodramatic Hollywood "woman's film," the mother-daughter relationship has long been a favorite theme, from *Stella Dallas* to *Mildred Pierce* to *The Turning Point.* But even though they focus on the complex of emotions contained in the mother-daughter bond, such films are characterized by a hidden misogyny. Pretending to sanctify the institution of motherhood, they more often merely exalt its ideal while punishing and humiliating the individual women who participate in it.

At the heart of all these representations of the mother-daughter bond is a psychological truth that has been much discussed in recent writing[3] but which has perhaps been best described by Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering.*[4] According to Chodorow a son must ultimately repress or deny his original attachment to and identification with the mother's body to take on a more abstract and less primally connected identification with the father. But a daughter undergoes no such shift in gender identification; her primary identification with the mother remains with her always. This "oedipal asymmetry" causes the daughter to continue to experience herself as unseparated, continuous with others, making it difficult for the daughter to separate off from her mother to claim her own life. It is

*Distributed by Iris Films, Box 5353, Berkeley, California, 94705.

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not surprising, then, that so much melodrama has centered upon the contradiction of an idealized mother love which, when actually made into a component of an ongoing relationship, turns into a smothering influence which the daughter seeks to escape (as in *Now, Voyager*).

The mother fares no better than the daughter in Hollywood's unravelling of this mother-love knot. The mother usually must learn to renounce her love for her daughter in order to suffer nobly for a supposedly higher good: the daughter's increased social status achieved through marriage (*Stella Dallas*) or even the daughter's entrance into a career (*The Turning Point*). Thus narrative resolution usually occurs through the mother's sacrifice—a sacrifice that unhappily perpetrates a patriarchal definition of motherhood *as* sacrifice.

Given these problems what are the alternatives for a radical feminist film-maker who chooses to represent this most crucial relationship? In the past, the most popular format has been the *cinéma vérité* documentary. But despite its efficacy as record, testimony, and organizing wedge, the documentary form has begun to be re-examined by critics skeptical of its neutrality. The use of the documentary as a form of social evidence has rested on the misconception that film can be equated with "truth." This assumed "truth" is negotiated through an unspoken contract with the spectator, necessitating both an acceptance of the film's subjects as real persons and of the film's narrative as a spontaneous recording of a candid situation. *Daughter Rite,* Michelle Citron's recent film about mothers and daughters, avoids misleading notions of truth by, first of all, subverting the audience's expectations of the documentary form. This subversion overcomes the limitations of identification and culminates in analysis. The film-maker's central problem was how to make a film about relations of women within the family without producing either a first-person confessional film or a fictional portrait of a representative family. By reconstructing and juxtaposing four different forms (*cinéma vérité,* soap opera melodrama, home movies, journals), Citron challenges identification itself—its false and easy notions of unity and truth.

Instead of representing a single mother and daughter in a single representational mode, *Daughter Rite* represents a plurality of interwoven subjective approaches to two different mothers in a variety of modes. Significantly, neither mother is directly represented in any of the film's sections—they appear to us only in the form of their daughter's desires, angers and memories of them. Thus Citron replaces conventional and unitary *representation of* with multiple, overlapping and contradictory *relations to.* All of these "relations to" are characterized by very specific problems of identification with the mother that radically affect each daughter's sense of self.

The film opens with several sequences of home-movie footage—flickering 8mm shots of a mother and two daughters at various stages of mother- and girlhood, smiling and waving at the camera in typical poses of coy and narcissistic femininity. In an early scene the mother and daughters ride a swan boat. The mother sits in the middle, a protective arm around each daughter, smoothing the hair of one, leading both in cheerful waves at the camera.

These movies have been taken, as are most home movies, by a father-cameraman who is never seen. Nothing could seem more true to life, more acceptable as unmediated reality, than a family's home movies. Yet by her techniques of rephotography, slowing down and repeating actions and gestures, Citron questions the neutrality of even this form of movie making, uncovering a more problematic picture of family life than these domestic scenes of family outings might suggest. Just as feminist historians have called attention to the dilemma of searching out women within written history, which itself is patriarchal, so Citron calls attention to a similarly patriarchal vision of domestic life captured in home movies.

Where the father's camera portrays the mother as a happy mother goose, instinctively leading her flock to fulfill their natural destinies as daughters, wives and mothers, *the daughter's* slow-motion re-editing of these haunting happy memories of the family album reveals a process of socialization that is neither very natural nor very happy. Optical step-frame printing repeats and slows the telling gestures with which the mother teaches her daughters their roles as

proper young ladies. Repetition renders the gesture unnatural, constraining, obsessive.

In a striking scene that begins the film, one of the daughters repeatedly races with an egg balanced precariously on a spoon held in her mouth to her mother at the far end of a field. As the film continues, we begin to understand that it is precisely the carrying of this egg—symbol of the daughters' role as the bearer of future generations and of the culture that nurtures them—that is at issue in this film.

Adrienne Rich has written that patriarchal culture depends upon the mother to act as a conservative influence, "imprinting future adults with patterned values even when the mother-child relationship might seem most individual and private."[5] By making us aware of the ritual nature of this imprinting, the home-movie sections of *Daughter Rite* claim the daughter's right to wrest the image of the mother away from the "power of the father," to filter it back through her own consciousness. A first step in this refiltering has thus been the dismantling of the father's image of both mother and daughter in order to discover the other possibilities which the patriarchal image has long masked. Inevitably, such a dismantling affects the daughter's own identification with the images and actions x-rayed on screen, making the acceptance of these previously "natural" truths now problematic.

Accompanying the home-movie images from the past, in counterpoint to them, is the first-person voice of one of the daughters, now an adult film-maker, speaking as if to a film diary of the troubled, guilt-ridden, on-going relationship with her mother. Thus past images of childhood combine with a present voice of adulthood that probes the confusing mixture of love, hate and guilt so typical of our adult relationship with our mothers.

The daughter's voice begins with the impetus for the film itself: her 28th birthday and the realization that she herself had been born when her mother was 28. As we see the egg race in the home movies, the daughter confesses her uneasiness at not following in her mother's footsteps: she is neither married nor having a child. The fear that she will not be like her mother (and will not carry on that egg) is followed in succeeding sections of voice-over by its even more terrifying opposite: the matrophobic fear of, in fact, *becoming* the mother.[6]

Inevitably, the daughter's attempt to claim her own life involves the expression of anger, even hatred, toward the mother. Force is necessary to break through the patriarchal definitions of womanhood which the mother implicitly foists upon the daughter. Unlike the anger of indirect misogyny common in the many so-called "woman's" films, the daughter's anger is more direct and positive, a necessary exorcism of emotions which have poisoned the daughter's own view of herself. As she explains, "I hate my mother and, in hating her, hate myself."

Anger is equally manifest, though more oblique, in the sections which alternate with the home movie images and diary-style voice over. Two women sit, ill at ease in front of the camera. The scene is a familiar one in recent documentary: the "common woman" consenting to share her experiences with a film crew, to communicate with other women. The camera moves in closer, rather clumsily, for effect as the emotional register requires. When the film next returns to the two sisters, they are again facing the camera, speaking this time about their childhood: how they kept diaries, how their mother read those diaries, to what an extent their mother denied them privacy in order to exert her own power over their lives.

It is only when the film returns for the third time to the domestic locus of the two sisters, who have moved from the dining room into the kitchen, that a shift in the style of representation moves the viewer to a shift in awareness. In the kitchen, the sisters for the first time

ignore the camera entirely: there is no face-front address, nor any particular testimony. Instead, the sisters interact with each other, revealing through conversation and gesture a range of character and emotion (including humor) inaccessible in the more formal interview format. It is this very display of character which signals the artifice that has underlain the sisters' scenes from the start. No *cinéma vérité* documentary could ever capture this scene of intimacy, this sudden ease in front of the camera. The scenes have been acted all along: these women, not sisters at all, are in fact actresses engaged in a convincing replica of documentary behavior. And to complicate matters even further, these are not the same sisters who appear as children in the home movie sections.

Nor, as it turns out, can the voice of the narrator speaking over the home movies be linked to either of the sisters in the apparent documentary footage. Subtle discrepancies in references to the two mothers force us eventually to grasp that what is at issue here is not an individual mother but a synthesis of a number of different daughters' attitudes towards their mothers and a number of different, but typical, experiences of the middle aged, divorced mother who finds herself at loose ends with all her family gone. This synthesis allows for variations of attitude (ranging from anger to sympathy), tone (ranging from maudlin melodrama to genuine lyricism) and socio-economic situation. But even within these latter scenes there is an alternation of modes—from quasi-*vérité* to staged fiction. In the second half of the film these staged scenes come more and more to resemble the stuff of soap opera.

Once the audience has been able to adjust successfully to the film's mixed modes, and synthetic approach to character, Citron is able to return to the earlier *vérité* style with stunning effect. The younger sister faces the camera and recounts a chilling tale of incestuous rape. Now the viewer is forced into a contradictory series of reactions: sympathy for the character, whether real-life or constructed; respect for the actress's performance, so true to life; anger at the film-maker's exposure of this intimate moment, followed by a quick save as its artificiality is recalled. In other words, the film's mixed-mode form of presentation profoundly criticizes the very form in use without sacrificing the emotional connection binding the viewer to its workings. What seemed at the film's start to be a one-dimensional documentary truth has become, by its end, a more complex rendering of truths through these shifts to a more obviously manipulated, fictional style of representation.

Although the tone of the adult sisters scenes ranges from gossipy anecdote to intense emotion, these scenes are in strong contrast to the voice-over that accompanies the home movie sections. The film-maker-daughter's voice has a reflective, often lyrical, tone. Her recollections of her mother freely mix specific events from the recent past with more obscure accounts of dreams. Combined with the flickering images of the already dream-like slow-motion of the homes movies, this disembodied, comparatively detached, voice often achieves a more sympathetic understanding of the mother. Perhaps it is precisely due to its dream-like locus that such a sympathy can be expressed, for on the more realistic bedrock of the sister scenes, daily behavior still lags far behind any such fantasy resolution.

Dreams are used repeatedly by the voice of the film-maker as one way of breaking out of the repetitive cycle in which the two sisters seem to remain caught. In this cycle, the mother infantilizes the daughter until such time as the daughter can infantilize her in turn. The crippling effects of this infantilization are stressed in a scene in which one of the sisters tells how her mother's babying of her during her own birth-giving sapped her strength. Only when her mother left the room could she regain it.

The film-maker, on the other hand, uses her dreams to imagine a more mysterious and powerful—though not always beneficent—mother. In the final episode of the film, her dream recounts the story of a mother who has, and can give, amazing strength, but whose strength is employed to strangely destructive ends. In this dream, the mother helps burn the film-maker's sister who is dying of cancer of the jaw and has asked to be set on fire. The

dream account tells how the mother takes control, burning and then burying the youngest daughter while the older sister (the film-maker) stands in awe and appreciation of the herculean task. If this dream offers no solution to the actual relations of mother and daughter, it at least avoids the reductive infantilization of the sister scenes, offering an appreciation of the mother's power to give and take life.

Another of the film-maker's dreams affords a more positive contrast to the sisters' view of the mother. The younger sister's *cinéma vérité* account of her rape by her stepfather is preceded by the film-maker's dream of an attempt by both her mother and grandmother to get her to accept an injection from a giant needle, "for the good of mankind." In both the dream of the injection and the "reality" of the rape, the mother emerges as the final culprit, tacitly acknowledging her complicity with the power of the father that rapes her daughter in one instance, wielding the phallic needle, symbol of that power, in the next. Here we see, most forcefully, the mother's role as "imprintor" of patriarchy. But the narrator's dream contains an obvious wish-fulfillment: the power of the daughter to refuse the needle and thus to refuse patriarchy.

As we have seen, this is the daughter's film. The girl who rode the swan boat in the home movies has grown up and taken over from Dad: now it is she who gets to peer through the lens, this time with x-ray eyes, to visualize the family. Toward the close of the film, in the home-movie sections, there are many shots of Mom alone, looking vaguely heroic, extending her arm out over an expanse of water. This near-noble portrait, along with the dreams of reconciliation, perhaps comprise an acknowledgement of the *other* film, the one which could match with positives all the negatives of this film: the mother's film, of course, which no daughter could ever make, but which could speak the flip side of all we have heard as alternate readings of identical actions.

As it is, *Daughter Rite* reflects the generational imperialism whereby a decade of daughters have frequently sought to remake our mothers in our own renovated image. By summing up the emotional quandaries of the moment, Citron has at least opened the way to dialogue. In fact, after the last image fades and the screen goes blank, a voice speaks as though out of the collective memory. It is the voice of the mother, speaking as she might in her daughter's fantasy, in fact taken from a Deena Metzger story about a mother reading her daughter's writing: " 'Why do you have to say all this,' she asks." For an answer, only the credits appear.

Daughter Rite is an important film for feminists due to the fundamentally new way in which Citron has chosen to rework existing forms. The critique from within of the *cinéma vérité* format accomplishes a dual task. On the one hand, Citron is able to criticize its limitations, showing that cinema cannot deliver up the Truth, that character identification may lead only to individualized pathos, that the political is not merely the personal, nor the personal only the private. Yet, at the same time, the film functions to redeem documentary, in that its form is accessible, related to the lives of women, a meaningful tradition and a still powerful taproot into the emotions as well as the intellects of viewers. By combining the mock-documentary with the introspective voice of narration which accompanies the home movies, Citron can validate the personal subjective documentary with qualification; rather than making it the only voice, she provides a multiple approach to the truths of mothers and daughters. And by replacing the usual individual with a synthetic character (whose experiences, in fact, were scripted out of materials derived from some 40 interviews with mothers and daughters), Citron is able to break the traditional documentary dependence on the isolated life and extend the individual experience into the social sphere.

In her use of soap opera, home movies, diary or journal, Citron employs three familiar "domestic" forms, explicitly re-viewing the home movies, while the soap opera form[7] is implicitly critiqued by the play-off with *cinéma vérité* which disrupts the credibility of both. These disruptions inevitably also bring into question the normally authoritative narrative voice; we begin to subject the narrator-film-maker to the same kind of distanced critique applied to her characters.

Even more important, because *Daughter Rite* is self-explanatory in its criticisms and priorities, it represents a significant alternative to films that base their forms of subversion upon systems of reference with which most viewers are not familiar. Because the documentaries taken as the film's starting point are a mutual resource for both film-maker and audience, and because soap operas have already entered the home (and women's consciousness) through television's inclusion in the daily rituals of domestic maintenance, Citron's work can offer a bridge of communication between feminist artists and the larger community of women.[8]

Over the past decade, there has been a dearth of work by film-makers who are both committed to the woman's community as an audience and yet equally influenced by the developing theory of feminist critics. By daring to enter into this seeming limbo, Michelle Citron moves beyond the previously acknowledged boundaries of the positive "image" of strong female role models and the avant-garde film's negative lament of women's inscription within patriarchal language. Because her film was made with a woman's movement audience, sharing a common concern with current issues of mother-daughter relations, in mind, because it annexes popular forms by both reviewing and criticizing them, *Daughter Rite* succeeds in opening up a major new direction for feminist film-making.

NOTES

1. *Of Woman Born* (New York: Bantam, 1976), p. 45.
2. "The Pink Glass Swan: Upward and Downward Mobility in the Art World," *Heresies*, vol. 1, p. 85.
3. See Nancy Friday, *My Mother/Myself: The Daughter's Search for Identity* (New York: Dell, 1978); Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*, cited above.
4. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.
5. Rich, p. 45.
6. Rich, p. 338. "Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mother's bondage, to become individuated and free."
7. This recasting of familiar domestic forms parallels issues under discussion by feminist film and television critics regarding the function of soap opera as a "woman's" form. Just as critics like Molly Haskell were able to find certain positive values in the "woman's film," so now there is an ongoing re-examination of soap opera's emphasis on domestic life, its spinning out of conversation, and the relegation of events to off-screen space to provide an endless verbal replay that retards the forward movement of the narrative in order to explore the lateral repercussions of each action on individual lines. See Tania Modleski, "The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas: Notes on a Feminine Narrative Form," *Film Quarterly* (Fall 1979), pp. 12-20.
8. Citron is working in quite a different direction, for example, from that taken by Mulvey and Wollen in *Riddles of the Sphinx*. Like *Daughter Rite*, *Riddles* takes its subject matter directly from the women's movement but it takes its formal strategies from theories of avant-garde film, placing itself within an ever-widening gap between the avant-garde and the women's movement. Citron, however, begins with forms familiar to the woman's movement and builds from there.

PIETRO INGRAO

Chaplin:

The Antagonism of the Comic Hero

The following article was published at the time of Chaplin's death in the periodical* La Città Futura *by Pietro Ingrao, then the president of the Italian Chamber of Deputies. Although one of the most engaged leaders of the Italian Communist Party, Ingrao has kept up his interest in film, which he had when I knew him as a young student in the Rome of the thirties. On a recent visit I obtained his permission to translate the piece for American readers.

—RUDOLF ARNHEIM

It has been said that Chaplin knew how to speak to the whole world; and his work has been interpreted in many ways, often from very different points of view. May I yield to the temptation of offering a "reading" of my own and presenting it, with all due hesitation, in this brief summary?

For this purpose I will take Chaplin's statements as literally as possible and deal with his works in the immediacy of their direct appearance; also I assign a precise date to Chaplin's world and work. Whatever one may say, it just is not true that he speaks of the human condition "in general." His people are not outside history. He talks about a concrete society, namely the capitalist world of the first half of our century, from the viewpoint of its most exemplary location, America. And he sees capitalism in its mobility. The figure of the little tramp remains the same for many years, but the world around him changes and so does he. The America of the early one-act comedies and even of *The Kid* and *The Gold Rush* was a period of violent traumas but still had a sense of adventure. It was a period in which the outsider seemingly could have a chance to reenter the game. This is quite different from the time of *City Lights* when the situation of the outsider in

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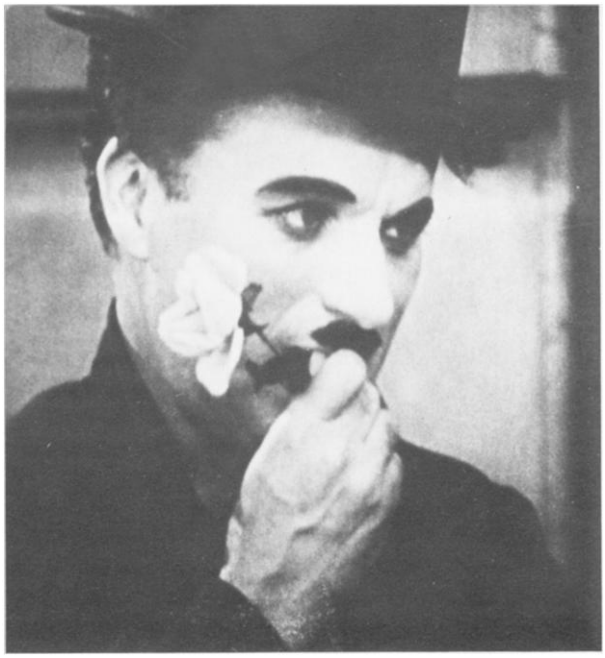
America had become totally untenable. *Modern Times* came when the hurricane of the crisis had attacked not only the derelict but also the common citizen; and finally *Monsieur Verdoux* points explicitly to the organic crisis of a whole way of life. One could express this also by saying that Chaplin captures the gradual widening of the contradiction inherent in the capitalist society.

He uses the comic, it seems to me, as his instrument for exposing that contradiction, and he points to the continuous conflict between the logic of the social mechanisms in operation and the simplest and most essential human needs. Keep in mind that Chaplin is not Pierrot, who longs for the moon; all he wants are the most normal things: eating, drinking, getting a woman, working, having a home, and going for a walk. These needs, however, do not manage to fit the logic or the choices of the society, which has its own laws, its own rhythms. Hence the comical effect, the surreal absurdity of it. The comic, which evokes the guffaws of the audience, makes the contradiction explicit and at the same time uncovers its hidden tragic harshness.

The contradiction causes an antagonism. Chaplin's comicality serves not only to demystify a world. The little tramp occupies too much space in Chaplin's films to be seen as a mere instrument of demystification. Granted that Chaplin laughs about his little man and thereby keeps him at a distance. But he uses him as a reference point: in his own way he is a hero, not just a victim. He always fights, and he resists. He belongs to the capitalist society as one of its products but he also stands for the unwillingness to melt and to adapt to that society's logic.

Chaplin's world, in other words, is not a "one-dimensional universe" à la Marcuse. It harbors an antagonism that has an autonomy of its own. Remember his characteristic gesture: even when he backs away in order not to get hit he raises his hand as a barrier to let the tough guy know that he had better watch out. He reaffirms his dignity and autonomy. Think also of how Chaplin's films end. The little man is never taken into the fold. He always walks away—once again an insistence on his autonomy. Or as Antonio Gramsci might put it: the "spirit of scission" remains always with him, even when he is defeated and gives up.

To be sure, he is a funny hero, terribly funny, and always so. I can think of few characters who are so desperately heroic as he is in his way of always taking on the big and powerful ones—like Don Quixote—even though he himself is so little, so scared, so weak. To be so heroic and yet so ridiculously funny, this is what I find thoroughly modern about Chaplin. Ultimately the only thing of value in the terrible, violent world he describes is the little man; but at every moment of his heroism he drops right away into the ridiculous. One might say that this comic effect underscores the particular placement of the tramp's "value," his human quality. The hero is a product of the



streets, he is one of the crowd, and in fact, judged by the current logic of the society in which he lives, he constantly slips and falls and looks silly. There is nothing Promethean about his defeats, nothing harmonious or solemn. This seems to me to present us with a lay vision of human dignity, which is earthly and in no way elitist. It emphasizes the many constantly occurring contradictions that befoul the road of reality. To have picked so "ridiculous" a hero for a symbol seems to me acutely and profoundly modern and therefore unforgettable.

To this sober complexity, this sense of the contradictory in the world of the real corresponds a unique neatness of form. I know very little about it, but I am just unwilling to accept certain evaluations I have read, which pretend that there is something ungrammatically crude about Chaplin's way of making films. To me, his films seem constructed with extreme care. Every camera angle fits the intended statement in every detail. Even certain narrative passages that look like routine fiction have the nudity of an explicit symbol, condensed enough to let him center his discourse upon what matters and what he wants to get across. And the central figure itself is pure form in every move, from the bowler hat down to the torn shoes. Here one would have to examine how this differs from certain types of avant-garde art: what Chaplin has taken from them, the analogies to certain implements of surrealism, as against everything that places him at such a distance from attempts to define one's language as disembodied form, as pure happening in all its ambiguity.

Here again it may be necessary to refer to specific dates in time and not to forget that Chaplin is on the ridge between different periods and that there is a horizon beyond which he does not reach. This is certainly true for the society he describes. It is the capitalist society of the explosive crises and the catastrophes of the twenties and thirties, the collapse of 1929, the mass unemployment, the world war, racism, fascism, Nazism. The state is represented almost exclusively by its most elementary instruments of repression, the police and the prisons, and even the civic society is confined to certain traditional institutions, such as those typical Protestant settings, the charity and welfare organizations that appear in the early shorts as well as the feature films. Not yet in sight is the neocapitalism of the Keynesian state, although in the thirties, at least in the United States, it was already maturing and then unfolded in the West: the state intervening in the economy and in the civic society, the new large instruments of control and orientation in a mass society, and the complexity of the public machinery that we have come to know so well during the last three decades.

One cannot look for this in Chaplin; but one must point out the historical limitation of the antagonism he sees in the capitalist society, the America he describes with all its bitterness. To put it concisely: Chaplin's "hero" is an isolated individual. He neither realizes nor participates in the onset of new modes of association. He is still outside the great movement that, whether one likes it or not, has begun to unify the exploited classes and the popular forces and that, at least on some of the continents, has organized the masses. Clearly I am not making here the silly demand that the little tramp show his party membership card. I simply note that a decisive phenomenon of our century's history remains beyond the pale of Chaplin's camera. Even when in *Modern Times* he gets mixed up in a street rally of protesting workers and in a rapid precipitation of scenes is taken for the demonstrators' leader who brandishes a red flag—even all this is mere turmoil, a mere ebullition of society, and not the organized history of a conscious mass movement. It is a manifestation that comes and goes in a flash.

Here now is the other limitation: the little man resists the destructive and dehumanizing mechanism, but in the last analysis all he can do is to defend himself. In the conduct of his human affairs he is not yet aware of the advent of an alternative procedure. At the end of his films he is seen in a long shot, walking away into the distance, shrugging his shoulders, refusing to join. One cannot see where his road leads to. He makes his way as a lonesome apparition, even when he is with his girl, as happens at the end of *Modern Times*—even when the dream has come true.

Perhaps even this isolation of the little tramp reflects history at a particular date. Perhaps it echoes indirectly the vicissitudes of the labor movement in the Anglo-Saxon realm and its setbacks in those years. These are questions that come up when one wishes to speak, without cheap apologies, of the great artist critic that was Chaplin and when one seeks to envisage in his story and its limitations the coming about of our own present time—a present that calls for new thoughts and new horizons.

Reviews

THE FUNHOUSE AND THE HOWLING

THE FUNHOUSE: Director: Tobe Hooper. Script: Larry Block. Producers: Derek Power and Steven Bernhardt. Photography: Andrew Laszlo. Editor: Jack Hofstra. Music: John Beal. Universal.

THE HOWLING: Director: Joe Dante. Script: John Sayles and Terence H. Winkless, based on the novel by Gary Brandner. Producers: Michael Finnel and Jack Conrad. Music: Pino Donaggio. Avco Embassy.

"When the eyes and ears are prevented from perceiving meaningful order, they can only react to the brutal signals of immediate satisfaction."

—Rudolf Arnheim,
FILM AS ART

Any genre has its highs and lows. Confronted with the current glut of stupid, gory, sexist ripoffs of *Halloween* and *Jaws* (and before them, of *The Exorcist* and *Carrie*)—unredeemably bad films like *Blood Beach, Zombie, The Boogey Man, Prom Night, Friday the 13th, The Final Conflict,* etc.—it may be hard to remember that many of the masterpieces of film history were horror films. By the latter I mean to include both those with supernatural themes (*Nosferatu, Vampyr*) and those whose psychological involutions implicated their "normal" protagonists as the dreamers of the nightmares of their worlds (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, Vertigo*), as well as monster movies on the order of *King Kong.* A theme that runs through many of the better ones is the unreliability of vision: in *Vertigo* Judy is killed by Scotty's insistence that she match the image of Madeleine; in *Mad Love* Dr. Gogol's insanity begins in mirrors and ends in the delusion that his obsessive attention has brought a waxwork to life; and in *Vampyr* David Gray's dream of a windowed coffin-lid becomes an explicit metaphor for the "window" of the movie screen before which the audience is entombed in its own category of dreaming. I have argued elsewhere that watching a film is often like having a dream and that some films deliberately model themselves on dreamlike structures; the legitimacy and even the primacy of horror films is to be found in the analogy of the nightmare, which plays at one time or another in everyone's darkened theater. The best horror films are not sexist bloodbaths but unsettling confrontations with intuition (*The Last Wave, Don't Look Now*), repression (*The Wolf Man*), childhood trauma (*The Bride of Frankenstein*), and the power of imagination (*Curse of the Cat People*), though many of them use that as a base from which to make social and political observations (*Freaks, Bedlam, The Island of Lost Souls, Invasion of the Body Snatchers, Caligari*). A staple figure in horror films is the intuitive seeker—often the "first victim"—who probes at his or her peril the mystery that presents itself as a calling (*Vampyr, The Last Wave, Psycho*) and who often finds evidence in some kind of unconventional, suppressed, or unpublished text: Caligari's notebooks, the underground paintings in *The Last Wave,* the Scroll of Thoth in *The Mummy,* the *Necronomicon* in Lovecraft's fiction, and in *Vampyr* the *Book of the Vampire.* In *The Turn of the Screw* and comparable fictions, such a text may itself become a primary horror object, the site of a dangerous coherence; in the James novella, for instance, the governess's notebook must wait for years and pass through several other narrators before it can be transcribed into the real-world medium of print. In the two best horror films released this year, *The Funhouse* and *The Howling,* most of these themes are at issue, and the "book of the vampire" is no longer a book but the tradition of the horror film itself.

It should be said at the outset that *The Funhouse* is the better of these pictures, the more rigorously self-enclosed, and by far the more frightening, while *The Howling* is the more socially committed, an oddball combination of Corman-level silliness and acute political insight. The question both address is that of how to deal with real horrors when one has been encouraged, particularly by horror films, to expect any danger to be imaginary, to be fun, to be presented within the frame of an institution (the carnival in *Funhouse*) or genre (*The Wolf Man* and the Disney cartoon in *The Howling*). In both cases the institution turns out to be the danger. In *The Funhouse* this boils down to "you get what you pay for" and "you pay for what you get": the audience wants to have fun being scared in the "funhouse" of the genre, and the director (whose surrogate is a fat-woman doll, as the credits make explicit) has the last laugh. In *The Howling,* on the other hand, the real-world horrors are pornography, irresponsible journalism, and the neurasthenic impact of the media in general as they make money out of presenting atrocities, encouraging their audience to take only the merchandising angle seriously and to disregard the suffering they report. *The Funhouse* points out the danger of modeling one's life on a horror

film (especially in its opening sequence, a parody of *Halloween* and *Psycho*) because, after all, one's fantasies have a way of coming true—i.e., one often precipitates into being that which one authentically desires. *The Howling* points out the danger of complacency, of assuming that horrors are only media creations instead of noticing that the world does sometimes behave like a horror film and that many of the media's creations are horrific. For both, however, the principal warning texts are horror films, and the implication in both is that their warnings ought to be taken more seriously, like the attractive note on the side of a pack of Camels.

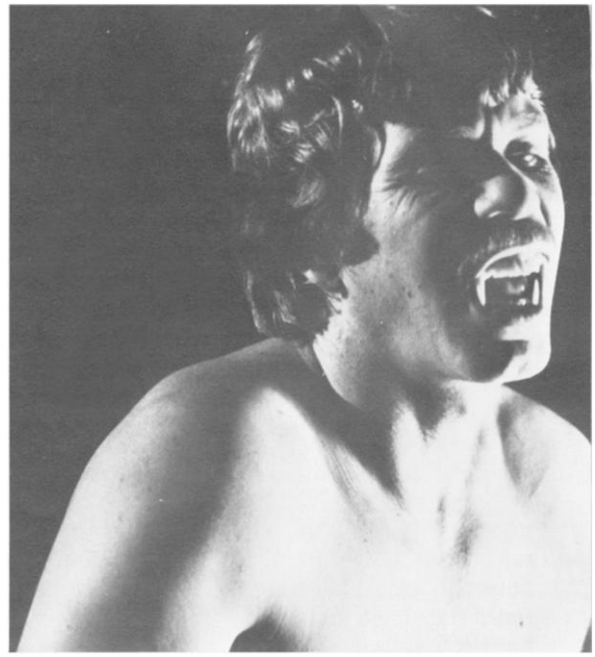
Joe Dante learned the business from Roger Corman and did his first memorable work as co-director of *Hollywood Boulevard*, a send-up of Corman pictures which hilariously detailed the problems of a film crew who are being systematically—and systemically—murdered as they make a violent movie; the emblematic scene in that film has the heroine raped by the projectionist at the drive-in premiere of her picture while a sex scene plays on the screen—a bitter reflexive joke reminiscent of the climax of Bogdanovich's best film, the Corman-produced *Targets*. In *Piranha*—of which I wrote what is to the best of my knowledge the only positive review—Dante teamed with John Sayles (*The Return of the Secaucus Seven*) to examine how people who have seen *Jaws* are less prepared than they ought to be to watch out for dangerous fish—which at first glance seems an artificial problem but which was carefully paralleled with the dangers of media control by the military-industrial complex, and which culminated in the spectacle of a salesman trying to stop a TV crew from conveying the truth to his audience: a scene as reminiscent of Watkins's allegorical *Punishment Park* as it was of network coverage of the Vietnam War. In *The Howling* he abandoned both Gary Brander's original novel and a screenplay by Terence H. Winkless to work again with Sayles and to explore much the same problem, but this time the target is not the military but the general problem of desensitization, coupled with a timely parody of such commercialized sensitivity therapies as *est* and Primal Scream.

The protagonist in *The Howling* is Karen White (Dee Wallace), a media superstar who anchors an LA news program and who is committed to searching out and reporting the truth. The film opens with a video interference pattern over which one can hear snatches of dialogue from the entire film, a good image of prophecy and of the failure of communication; the film closes, equally appropriately, with a diegetically legitimated clip from *The Wolf Man* (Maria Ouspenskaya's "Go now, and heaven help you") and a blip of scrambled video, an emblem of the dialectic within which this film functions.

Karen is first seen on her way to meet Eddie Quist, a bestial sex murderer whose calling cards are those insipid yellow "happy-face" decals; she is wired for sound, but because of "all that neon out there" (an obvious but still relevant symbol) the crew at the station is unable to receive her signals; thus from the start Karen is presented as someone whose trust of communication/media/openness is dangerously inappropriate, a trust that in the end will prove genuinely, ennoblingly tragic. She meets Eddie in a booth in a pornographic movie arcade, and he turns out to be not only a werewolf but also an unsettlingly quiet fellow with a couple of brilliant lines. Standing behind her, he puts a quarter in the slot and tells her to "just watch" a film in which a young woman is stripped and raped by several men. "She didn't feel a thing," he says. "They're not real, the people here, they could never be like me." So far this is reminiscent of Daffy Duck's rationalization for turning Bugs Bunny over to the Abominable Snowman—"I know it's a despicable thing to do, but I'm different from other people: pain *hurts* me"—and I bring that in not for a joke but because it is the one thing a rapist or murderer has to believe, because it is at the base of any attempt to deny the being of the victim and is the root impulse of fascist self-absorption, as the Nazi camps and the porn houses equally demonstrate. But Eddie goes on: "You're different; I watch you on TV; I know how good I could make you feel . . . I want to give you something." For Eddie the TV image is somehow more seductive, more tied to reality and to his own self-concept, than the pornographic film; it is because it is believed that TV news is dangerous here, whereas by the end of the film it is when it shows the truth that it is *not* believed. Because the media (as we now have them) trade in the half-truth of commercialized communication, they fail to live up to their potential as a positive social force. (In retrospect, it turns out that what Eddie really means is that normal people don't enjoy sex as much as werewolves do, and that he senses Karen has the potential to respond in his terms.) Eddie changes into a wolf—the "gift" he has in mind is bestial sex, or freedom—and is shot by police, later to regenerate and return; Karen

suffers temporary amnesia, but has dreams in which she almost remembers what happened. These dreams are significantly of the porn film and of the figure of Eddie backlit by the projector lens. When she goes on the air to report her experience, she sees the porn film in the lens of the TV camera and is unable to continue; that is the symbolic highpoint of the film as well as its message.

Eventually the story takes her and her husband to "The Colony," an Esalen-type retreat run by a werewolf doctor by the name of George Waggner (director of *The Wolf Man*), whose intention is to help his lycanthropic clients learn to channel their bestial impulses into relatively social expressions; one of his most lovable patients is named Erle Kenton (director of *Ghost of Frankenstein*), played by John Carradine; other veteran actors in this film include Slim Pickens, Kenneth Tobey (*The Thing*), and Kevin McCarthy (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*). For a while it seems as if the film will be overwhelmed by its spectacular make-up effects—designed by Rob Bottin with help from Rick Baker, and indebted to the work of Dick Smith[1]—especially in a daring sex scene between two werewolves; but the dark, reflexive humor is never offscreen for long. Two of Karen's colleagues, Terry and Christopher, visit an occult bookstore and begin to suspect that werewolfery is part of the story. The proprietor shows a cache of silver bullets that a client had requested but never claimed (guess why . . .); when they ask whether he believes in the legends, he answers, "What am I, an idiot? I'm making a buck here"—and though this may represent Dante's feelings about his chosen genre, it also continues the question of the insincere communicator. Terry and Christopher get further hints from a late-night showing of *The Wolf Man,* and Terry goes to the Colony to help Karen. When Terry calls Christopher to let him know what is really going on up there, Christopher is watching a cartoon in which a wolf traps a lamb, and this cartoon is crosscut with Terry's being brutally murdered by a werewolf; ironically Christopher does not switch off the set, and the two sound tracks overlap (making the point that many of the characters in this film and their real-world counterparts may not be able to sort out reality from fantasy and so may fail to be aware of the reality of those dangers the media have trivialized—an echo of *Piranha* and its critique of the coverage of the War). By the time Christopher calls the sheriff (who is of course one of Them—continuing the indictment of bourgeois credulity) and buys the



Christopher Stone (the husband) goes through a startling transformation in THE HOWLING

silver bullets, it is too late to save Terry. Eventually he does save Karen, but in their escape she is bitten and so must herself become a werewolf—and the counter-culture point is hammered in that this last disaster would not have happened had they not both trusted the sheriff once too often.

All this leads to the marvelous climax of the film, where Karen decides to make her audience believe in the danger of rampant bestiality and fascist control in the culture by changing into a wolf on camera and having herself shot by one of Christopher's silver bullets. She cries while she does this, and emerges as a media saint, committed to the last to the communication of truth. The horrified producer (McCarthy) cuts to a dogfood commercial, and Dante cuts to snatches of audience reaction: a man looking at the *TV Guide* to find out what category of program this is; two

THE HOWLING: *John Carradine and Slim Pickens*

kids who believe what they see; the bookseller shaking his head; and a barroom where one man accepts, without getting worried about it, that her transformation and death were real, while others dismiss the whole thing as "special effects." The film of which all this is finally most reminiscent is not a horror film but *Act of the Heart,* with its painful examination of the problem and value of the sacrificial gesture in a culture that does not know how to pay attention.

Now it is certainly true that the majority of horror films in the past few years have contributed not to this level of consciousness-raising but to the brutalization of the audience. Some, like the sickening *Motel Hell,* are partially redeemed by an EC Comics brand of humor; some, like *Jaws,* score social-relevance brownie points by attacking bureaucrats and validating paranoids; and some, like *Halloween,* are redeemed by sheer technical skill. But most of them have no purpose beyond that of encouraging their audiences to participate in fantasies of victimization and destructive aggression. As Roger Ebert observed in a fine article on *I Spit on Your Grave,*[2] the crucial influence of *Jaws* and *Halloween* has been to validate the use of subjective camera for the visual viewpoint of the horror object; whereas in earlier decades the audience tended to share the viewpoint of the victim and to see the monster, in the seventies it became commonplace for the audience to share the viewpoint of the killer or monster, and along with this came an emphasis on the isolated female as primary victim. (In this context, it is significant that in *The Funhouse* and *The Howling* the seeker-figures whose perspectives turn out to be justified are women.) Such films are clearly part of the backlash against the feminist movement as well as an extension of pornography into the media mainstream, and what they take from *Psycho* is an overwhelming interest in the psychology of the (male) murderer. This is altogether different from the sympathy one was encouraged to feel for Frankenstein, the Wolf Man, King Kong, or the Mummy, whose alienation was usually tied to society's rejection of their impulse to love, and which was presented in the context of their clearly inappropriate expressions of that impulse. Kong never set out to kill Ann, the Wolf Man did everything in his power to protect Gwen, the Frankenstein monster intended to play with the little girl because she reminded him of a flower, and the Mummy's project was always to reunite with his beloved Princess Ananka. Although Hitchcock's intention in *Psycho* was, typically, to implicate the voyeurism of his audience, that film was apparently endorsed as a glorification of the psychotic. The combination of *Carrie* and *Psycho,* together with the new vistas of violence opened by *Night of the Living Dead* (another good film with an unfortunate impact) and the anti-feminist hostility of *Straw Dogs* and *The Godfather Part One,* which received an "intellectual" stamp of approval in the vicious *A Clockwork Orange*—all this led to the cult of the mis-

Kevin McCarthy in the final sequence of THE HOWLING

understood woman-killing psychotic, the "poor me" murderer typified in *Prom Night* and *Terror Train.* In *The Exorcist* and *The Omen* there was some attempt to belie the presentation of children as monsters by implying that these particular children were unusual incarnations of the demonic, and *Halloween* continued that by having its child-then-adult murderer be in fact "the boogey man." But *Halloween*'s use of subjective camera, courtesy of *Jaws,* did undeniably make the link between audience and murderer without any of Hitchcock's irony or Spielberg's *Enemy of the People* Ibsenism. When socially conscious horror films like *Alien* and *Dawn of the Dead* came into this audience context, they were embraced for their violence and terror at the expense of their other attributes and indirectly contributed to the momentum of the worst aspects of the genre. But when Herzog resurrected the beautiful and visionary aspects of the horror film in his *Nosferatu,* it found practically no audience, and the heritage of Murnau and Dreyer receded even further. It remains to be seen whether *The Howling* will find an audience simply on the merits of its special effects—though that does seem, unfortunately, likely—or whether it will remind the audience of the value of the genre as a means of dealing with the institutionally and psychologically repressed; for horror films are one of our important ties with the mythic, with the visionary, and their best goal has historically been—as in the analogy of the Freudian dream—to bring to consciousness that which has been repressed, so that integration and wholeness will become a real possibility. The therapist in *The Howling* is a deliberate caricature of the cult of the eruption of the bestial who pays lip service to integration, and its heroes are those who are lovers or vegetarians (Karen's husband) not because they are out of touch with bestiality but because they have *chosen* to love.

The Funhouse may well contribute to this return to the better energies and impulses of the genre, though again it is entirely possible that audiences will watch it for its tentshow dancing girls and two murdered women (it is hardly a redeeming issue that there are also three murdered men). It may do so because of its reflexivity—its relentless emphasis on the victims' having chosen to go to the equivalent of a horror film—and because of its ruthless caricatures of phallic aggression, which is absolutely never validated as it is in *Halloween.* To take an explicit example: the father/barker who owns the funhouse (played by Kevin Con-

Sylvia Miles and Elizabeth Berridge: THE FUNHOUSE

way, last seen in *The Lathe of Heaven*) is killed by being thrust onto a sword held by a mannequin; it protrudes through the front of his belly and he grasps it like an erection. In a slightly reversed echo of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* (Mordred's killing of his father by pulling him onto the spear that has impaled him), the barker tries to kill but only wounds the male good-guy, Buzz, by forcing him belly-first onto that sword, in a homoerotic patriarchal nightmare that could not possibly please the audience. To take another: the monster in this film (played very well by the mime Wayne Doba, with special make-up executed by Craig Reardon and designed by the ubiquitous Rick Baker) is an unlovable child on the model of the Frankenstein monster, and about halfway through the film he tries to buy the sexual favors of the palm-reader, Madame Zena (Sylvia Miles). He is presented as pathetic, and more than that he has a premature orgasm—which is of course a taboo in pornography and in similar fantasy structures; the knives in *Halloween* and *Psycho* may imply sexual dysfunction on the part of the killers, but as symbols they are always erect, and that is one reason such images may appeal to rapists, who are often impotent but who are in any case only using sex as an outlet for violent hatred. When he goes on to kill Madame Zena he indirectly shorts out the electrical system, and the funhouse (in which the four protagonists are hiding overnight, for fun) comes momentarily to life; the point is that the funhouse/horror film is here explicitly tied to perversity and sexual frustration, rather than to sexual fulfillment.

The other female killing makes a similar point in a more horrible way. It is a genre convention to pass moral judgment on the victims by killing them off in what are presented as appropriate ways. (The fellow who gets the idea of staying in the funhouse, for instance, besides being selfish and dope-oriented and

greedy, is killed just after recounting a story of how he once tried to scare his brother but was locked in a closet for his troubles; thus it seems appropriate that he should die trapped in the funhouse.) The character Liz is presented as promiscuous, and so one might expect that her punishment will be connected with her sexuality. When she is trapped by the monster, she attempts to seduce him—but it is obvious that she is terrified, that she is doing the cleverest thing under the circumstances. She has witnessed the scene wth Madame Zena and has to distract him long enough to stab him; she does but it isn't effective enough, and so instead of the spectacle of a woman's being punished for being a woman, there is the horrifying image of her being murdered by an unimaginably ugly and impotent rapist. As in the best horror films, there is an unsettling mixture of identification with the victim and reluctant compassion for the monster. There is nothing remotely titillating about these and similar scenes, yet they cannot be called disgusting; what they have instead is a horrible beauty that has always been one of the central attractions of the genre and the core of its claim to art. Much of this is due to the dark, sharp color cinematography of Andrew Laszlo, but it is undeniable that director Tobe Hooper, who made the shocking, repulsive *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and the laconically beautiful TV adaptation of *Salem's Lot,* emerges here as a highly efficient and professional craftsman. (Auteur fetishists may enjoy noticing the tie-in with *Chainsaw* of the degenerate family, the endangered teenagers, and the lone female survivor.)

Where this all comes together is in three remarkable reflexive sequences: the opening, the conclusion, and a scene in the middle where the father confronts his monstrous son. "As God is my witness," he says, "I don't hate the sound of your voice." Up till this point the monster has been wearing a Frankenstein mask, a downright brilliant gesture not just because the Frankenstein monster is the correct prototype (the child rejected by his creator and looking for love) but because with the mask on he appears part of the *normal* world, the world that includes horror images as elements in its playground. Now the father criticizes him so harshly that the son tears off his mask and confronts him with what he is. The horror, the audience discovers, is real; as the ads say, "There is something alive in the funhouse," and the fun in a horror film is in confronting the possibility that the horrors are not made up. In this ploy is the central difference

THE FUNHOUSE

from *The Howling,* but it must be noted that where *The Funhouse* contacts reality is in its analysis of the impact of horror films on the fantasy lives of their audience, and in that respect the films are not so different.[3]

The latter point is made clearly in the first five minutes. A young boy—in subjective camera—looks at a Frankenstein poster, takes a knife from his bedroom wall, puts on a clown mask, and heads for the bathroom where his sister Amy (the lead and seer-figure, played by Elizabeth Berridge) is taking a shower. The parody of *Halloween* is entirely explicit, and one cringes at the prospect of another *Boogey Man* or *Prom Night.* In shots that just as closely echo *Psycho* he pulls aside the shower curtain and jabs the butcher knife at Amy's belly—where it is revealed to be a rubber toy. The boy is a straightforward image of the child not as horror-object but as horror-audience, and if Hooper's audience finds him as harmless as their own presumed self-image, they will learn as the boy later does that there is more at issue than fun, that these games are connected in a meaningful way with genuine rape and murder in a unattractively perverse context. This is an image of the child that deconstructs the child images of *The Exorcist, The Omen,* and *Halloween* rather than reinforces them, and scorns utterly those in *Prom Night* and its ilk. Amy then goes downstairs to wait for her date, where she finds her parents watching *The Bride of Frankenstein* on TV, a film that by the end will be revealed as the same sort of clue provided by *The Wolf Man* in *The Howling.*

For in the end the monster tries to make Amy his bride in death. He has cornered her in the basement of the funhouse; she holds him off with a steel pole. She is distracted by a (false) skeleton that drops behind her, but has the self-possession to realize which is the real horror (as the victim in the again-relevant *Targets* does not) and strikes at him. He pulls the bar away and accidentally electrocutes himself on the power-plant, an echo of his killing of Madame Zena; this starts in motion the mechanism that pulls the ride's carts, which catches him in its hooks and chains. He appears to be dead, and Amy stands before him—but he revives and almost succeeds in pulling her toward him. This further echoes the recent death of his father and the business with the sword, for both of them try to destroy their destroyers on emblems of their own perverse power. But she gets away, and the monster is ground in half by the wheels of the mechanism, in one of the greatest and most vivid images in the recent history of the genre.[4] The point is that the heroine, being "normal," cannot finally destroy this monster; he can only be destroyed by his own kind, by his own metaphysical category (as there are only supernatural ways of killing vampires and werewolves), by his own level of imagery. What destroys him is the funhouse from which he is inseparable and which is an emblem of the horror film in general; thus this image celebrates the self-enclosed qualities of the genre, the ways it is a law unto itself (again, like myth), which are the keys to the ways it impinges on reality.

The horror film is not a model for behavior but a categorical intrusion. If it seems to be turning more regularly reflexive in these two recent films, that may be because its makers realize the importance of its rediscovering its roots, its laws, and its genuine calling, and thus defining itself to itself in ways that may teach the sidetracked and brutalized audience what to see in it.

NOTES

1. See *Cinéfantastique* X, 3 (Winter, 1980) for articles on *The Howling* and *The Funhouse*, and XI, 1 (Summer, 1981) for another article on *The Howling* and extensive information on the careers of Dick Smith and Rick Baker.

2. Roger Ebert, "Why Movie Audiences Aren't Safe Anymore," *American Film* VI, 5 (March, 1981).

3. Another recent film that faces this question is Vernon Zimmerman's *Fade to Black*.

4. This wheel image is taken (if I remember correctly) from *The Strange Door*, but here it has much greater complexity and beauty.

MON ONCLE D'AMERIQUE

Director: Alain Resnais. Script: Jean Gruault. Photographer: Sacha Vierny. New World Pictures.

The film is called a "comedy." The director, Alain Resnais (*Hiroshima mon amour, Last Year at Marienbad, La Guerre est finie*, etc.) is scarcely known for his humor. If anything, he's been a cinematic logician, a pioneer in the search for fresh images and new modes of narrative that distinguished the early French New Wave. But *Mon Oncle d'Amérique* is indeed a "comedy"—a comedy of logic, and a tragedy of feeling.

At the beginning, four voices are talking all at once. The first to be heard belongs to a sociobiologist, explaining his theories of human behavior, over a near-abstract image of a pulsating heart. Then the images change to pretty pictures of the natural world, and the other voices enter in turn, belonging to three characters who are telling their life stories from birth onward, phrase by alternating phrase. As the stories diverge, the thread of the narratives is lost, and the voices briefly become mere music—a Bach fugue, perhaps, with the separate melodies playing simultaneously in counterpoint. Then the film-maker cuts, and clarity is regained.

That moment of pure musicality, however, is a clue to the whole, a gravely playful moment in which Resnais allows the viewer to grasp the structure of his film even before the film has really begun: the movie is precisely a baroque fugue, with the characters as disparate motifs to be finally united in the coda. "In a fugue, several independent voices—generally three or four—take turns in presenting a striking theme or subject," writes Joseph Machlis, in his basic text, *The Enjoyment of Music* (New York: Norton, 1955). "A fugue consequently is a type of music based on imitative counterpoint, in which a theme of strongly marked character pervades the entire fabric, entering now in one voice, now in another. . . . The subject is stated at the outset in one of the voices without accompaniment. It is then imitated in another voice—while the first continues with a countertheme."

Mon Oncle d'Amérique begins in exactly this fashion. But the fugue is also one of the most playful formats in music: "The only section of the fugue that follows a set order is the exposition," Machlis continues. "Once that is done with, the further course of the fugue is bound only by the composer's fancy. Caprice, exuberance, surprise—all receive free play within the supple framework of the form."

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Since caprice, exuberance, and surprise are associated with our expectations of comedy, the fugal form always holds a potential for wit. And, like a Bach fugue, *Mon Oncle* . . . explores these modes, combining a cool lucidity of contrapuntal structure with a half-disguised underlying passion; a series of caprices and surprises develop the deeply felt, striking theme. The refuge from anguish lies in structure, as in Bach's music, and in ironic, clever intelligence.

In the intellectual comedy of *Mon Oncle* . . . , what happens to the characters is tragedy, but it's presented comically—not merely to soften the blow, but to soften up the audience for the intellectual assault of sociobiologist Henri Laborit's theories, which ultimately view man as yet another behavior-conditioned animal. To paraphrase Shaw, "If you propose to tell the truth, you had better make it funny or they will stone you to death." Like John Huston's *Wise Blood, Mon Oncle* . . . draws its humor from the irony of human hope absolutely rebuffed, and like *Wise Blood,* it's brilliant, dazzling film-making, thoroughly entertaining but far from incontrovertibly funny.

In a sense, the film is a grand teaching machine with a wondrously designed program. As Laborit discusses his behavioral theories—specifically, that aggression is a fundamental necessity for maintaining mental and physical health in the face of frustration, and that frustration is inevitable—three interrelated "case histories" contradict, complement, and ultimately confirm his hypotheses. And yet, the three are far more than "cases"—they're among the most complex, genuine, and insistently whole characters to be met on the screen, even if they're ultimately doomed to become laboratory rats in shock-wired cages. For most of the film, the three seem to defy analysis, up to the very coda when it becomes apparent that, no matter how distinct their voicings, they're all playing the theme that Laborit has introduced.

"Our brains are formed by others," Laborit comments. "We *are* those others." To Resnais, memory (in which we absorb others into ourselves) is the repository of personality; in *Hiroshima mon amour,* for instance, the unbridgeable gulf between the lovers lies in history: they can't quite manage to be present in the present, because he *is* Hiroshima, and she's equally trapped in Nevers.

Here, the trio are seen as children, being shaped by their families, often much against their wills ("Say hello to the nice lady"). Jean (Roger-Pierre), born on his family's private island—because his father and grandfather don't want to entrust his birthing to the perceived incompetence of the medical establishment—spends the rest of his childhood free from the stress of exposure to the non-familial world, in a near-magical private realm where a loving, patient grandfather teaches him about nature. At moments of stress in adulthood, Jean always remembers his grandfather, and his enchanted private island.

The other two, having less limpid childhoods to contemplate, are more influenced by the wider culture, in the form of favorite movie stars. René (Gerard Depardieu, in a very *sympathique* portrayal) is a stolid factory-manager from a narrow-minded, stingy farming family. Played by an actor often called "the new Jean Gabin," at every moment of crisis René has flash-frame visions of (naturally) Jean Gabin, looking stolid, stoic, and sensitive as he faces his doom time and time again in a plethora of flash-frames. This is the role model that teaches René how to react to stress, and, in a world of rapid change (wherein René's rural factory is taken over by a large Paris-based corporation), it's a negative model—too rigid, too principled, too poetic to adapt to slick multinational commerce. Gabin's stoicism finally becomes a false front that René can no longer maintain.

Meanwhile, Janine (Nicole Garcia, a new face to Americans, and an extraordinary one, leonine, tense, and radiant) is an idealistic young actress, who eventually becomes a textile designer for René's conglomerate. Running away from her working-class leftist parents, she chooses the aristocratic Jean Marais (swashbuckler in the movies of the forties, as well as poet in Jean Cocteau's films) for her model: the impeccable romantic cavalier, prone to rescuing fainting damsels. It's a measure of *Mon Oncle*'s acuity that the heroine should choose a chivalrous male role model, rather than his passive female counterpart—this is truth in place of the expected sex-role banalities. Marais, however, serves Janine just

René (Gérard Depardieu) in MON ONCLE D'AMERIQUE

as badly as Gabin serves René—by behaving nobly, like a proper cavalier, and rescuing fainting ladies and gentlemen, she sacrifices her own happiness to her ideals.

And Jean, who has become a middle-class teacher and radio personality with vaunting political ambitions (as well as Janine's sometime lover), sees himself as Danielle Darrieux—another neat sex-role reversal. The somewhat compromised intellectual adores the glamorous, somewhat compromised blonde (Darrieux was considered a bit over-compliant during the Nazi occupation). Jean, however, has but few flashes of his heroine, compared to the other two—as the most pragmatic, least emotional (on the surface) and most ambitious of the trio, he's the one least influenced by idols and idealism, and the one most influenced by his genteel and gentle upbringing. Like Darrieux, he's fundamentally passive (no wonder he's drawn to Janine!)—and, in his complaisance looks backward to the time when he was protected from the world. It's the worst adaptation of all, in one sense: although his ultimate reactions to continued stress are less extreme than those of the other two, he's actually lost more by the end—both his ambition (like René) and his love (like Janine).

Eventually, all three stories are intertwined, all three characters are faced with intense frustration, and each reacts accordingly: Jean is unwilling to risk disordering his life and leaving his provincial mansion for the sake of happiness; Janine—ultimately the strongest and genuinely noblest—carries on despite her despair; René attempts suicide, unable to maintain a stoic face any longer. The compromiser, the swashbuckler, and the doomed tough-guy once again, they're nothing if not consistent, because every frame of *Mon Oncle* . . . is deliberate, like some intricately plotted Victorian novel in which every random minor character turns out to be somebody else's long-lost uncle from America. In a fugue, such total consistency is a necessity—for counterpoint to work, none of the voicings can suddenly wander off to a different key or a new tune. The more complicated a musical structure (and the fugue is among the most complicated), the greater the need for such absolutes. In a film like *Mon Oncle* . . . , with its tragic theme, it's only the superb orderliness of its fugal structure that makes the film bearable. Science, music, and cinema join their varying forms of order, and the order they discover is almost harder to bear than the chaos they enlighten.

Along with the intercut flash-images of movie stars, Resnais uses additional cutaways to provide diversion, humor, relief—and proof of Laborit's theories. As Laborit speaks of the biological need for movement, Resnais cuts to a cute little puppy on a ledge, afraid to jump off, and yearning puppy-like and frustrated for a way down. The desire to satisfy hunger is reflected in a wild boar snuffling around in the woods (to be encountered again later, as Jean hunts the wild boar and Janine hunts Jean, the hungry hunting the hungry.) Natural creatures, beautifully photographed acting natural, prove the theories, and simultaneously distance the viewer from the human dramas.

Janine (Nicole Garcia) in MON ONCLE D'AMERIQUE

Ultimately, like every other factor, these images are united in a surprising way: after we've seen Laborit's laboratory rats reacting to stress, we find our stressed human beings becoming rats. In one shot, we see two of the characters dressed in white rat costumes interacting in their bourgeois living room; then, a real white rat goes nosing through a miniature of the same comfortable room. In these risible images, the characters have finally been reduced to the status of conditioned animals behaving precisely in accord with the biologist's predictions.

Here, though, the tensions that reduce people to rats aren't the perils of "nature": the rat's cage is the world man has constructed for himself. Janine, alone, suffers from the relatively natural frustrations of love; she's not only the strongest, and the most successful, but also the closest to natural. She's able to change her profession with grace because she's kept something of her nonprofessional self *for* herself, but she's unable to change her affections for exactly the same reason. For the two men, the corporate world is the cage: René, about to be demoted, is led through office corridors like an animal to slaughter—and when he cooks an exquisite dinner for his new co-manager, the other man lights a cigar just as the entrée is served! Meanwhile, Jean, losing

his political position, has a sudden fit of spasmodic pain in a restaurant. The need for food is subvented by less direct needs in both men. Laborit speaks of the need to dominate one's own world, and the need to aggress when one can't dominate; Janine can invade Jean's private domain (even if she's rebuffed there) but the corporate world can't be dominated at all. Corporate mores reward those who adapt to corporate frustration, and react accordingly—the "*aggressive* businessman," the "*aggressive* exec"—but neither René nor Jean are fit to survive in this bureaucratic cage, and Janine survives only by finding her sorrows elsewhere.

It's indubitably tragic. It's also, in its way, quite funny, finding its odd humor in the tension between the complexity of life and the simplicity of scientific theory. Comedy relies on distance; Resnais alternates between a close-up view of human anguish, and the witty distancing of intercut footage of old-time movie stars and amusing animals. The humor is that of a momentary relief from tragedy, with the tragic events seen from a sudden, new, capricious perspective. The showy playfulness of the filmic style serves as a deliberate alienating device: Resnais clearly intends to present a reality free from the roseate banalities of the average fictional film, and he pulls back into wit and structure so that his reality will be bearable.

The style is a revival of the bittersweet fun-and-misery mixture of Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player* (in fact, Resnais even casts *Piano Player*'s Marie Dubois as Depardieu's sympathetic wife) and its piquant pleasures are similar. When there's nothing but agony left for the characters, there's still the consolation, for the viewers, of a fresh and exquisite structure, mathematical in its purity and detachment, and musical in its grace.

The title sounds deceptively humorous in French: "my uncle from America" must be some indulgent, awkward, shambling fellow (played perhaps, by Fernandel, or Belmondo, or Michel Simon) caught in the clash of cultures, some gourmand eating Big Macs.

The *real* uncle from America?

To Jean, he's an uncle who left a secret treasure buried on the private island, waiting for Jean's discovery.

To René: "Whenever anyone would talk about change, my father would remind me of my uncle in America, who died a bum in Chicago. Or so *he* said."

To Janine: "I thought happiness was something I had coming to me—from an uncle in America."

And to the head of the textile conglomerate, the voice of reality (momentarily standing in for Henri Laborit):

"America doesn't exist. I know. I lived there."

—NAOMI WISE

EL NIDO (THE NEST)

El Nido, 1980, is the second film by Jaime De Armiñán to be nominated for an Oscar for the Best Foreign Film (the first was *Mi Querida Señorita* in 1973), yet his work is virtually unknown in this country because it has not yet received distribution. It has been seen only in festivals and in special showings.* The loss is ours for Armiñán is a mature talent who expresses himself with equal brilliance both in writing and directing.

Born in Madrid, Armiñán began his career as a playwright, winning the two most prestigious dramatic prizes in Spain—the Calderón de la Barca and the Lope de Vega. He then moved to television where his work was awarded the Golden Nymph of Monte Carlo and the Golden Rose of Montreux. He turned to cinema in the seventies. After *Mi Querida Señorita* (*My Dearest Señorita*), he wrote and directed *El Amor del Capitan Brando* (*The Love of Capt. Brando*), *Nunca Es Tarde* (*Never Too Late*), and *Al Servicio de la Mujer Española* (*At the Service of the Spanish Woman*).

His latest film *El Nido* (*The Nest*) is extremely original though it consciously evokes two Renaissance classics—Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth.* It is a sophisticated love story about a rich, eccentric old widower named Don Alejandro and an extraordinarily precocious 13-year-old girl named Goyita Mendez. What it shares with its Renaissance sources is the ability to present this tale from multiple perspectives. Although it reaffirms the ennobling power of the romance, the film acknowledges all of the other possibilities inherent in the material, which creates a rich mixture of tones—comic, tragic, romantic and ironic.

On one level, Don Alejandro can be seen as another Don Quixote—with the young Goyita as his Dulcinea, his earthy friend Father Eladio as his Sancho Panza, a beautiful white horse as his Rozinante, and a crotchety but loyal middle-aged housekeeper who tries to keep him at home. The old age of this imaginative

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Don is greatly enriched by a romantic quest that is both dangerous and ennobling and that ends up costing his life, which he willingly forfeits. Though he is described by others as "ridiculous, crazy, an asshole, and a sex-maniac," this chivalric adventure enables him to truly love for the first time, it makes his relationships with others richer and more honest, and it gives his life transcendent meaning.

The film is simultaneously set against *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. The first time both we in the audience and our hero Don Alejandro see Goyita, she is rehearsing her role as Lady Macbeth for a school performance. Throughout the film both characters quote crucial lines from the play. For example, in the scene where Goyita persuades Don Alejandro to make a secret blood pact, in which they carve each other's initials on their palms, at the moment that he complies, he holds out his hand, closes his eyes and recites: "It will have blood they say, blood will have blood." Though he intends Macbeth's line to be playfully ironic in this context, it turns out to be prophetic.

Goyita is the true aggressor in the romance. She captures and enchants Alejandro and imposes a series of demands, leading up to her insistence that he murder her arch enemy —the Police Sergeant who is her father's boss. Like Lady Macbeth, she is a powerful female who manipulates one man into killing another. Both killer and victim are traditional patriarchs functioning for her as father surrogates. Her tragic prototype also saw a resemblance between her own father and the man she persuaded her husband to murder: "Had he not resembled My father as he slept, I had don't." (II,ii,12-13) Younger and stronger than Lady Macbeth, Goyita is a survivor who profits from the relationship with Alejandro both materially and emotionally.

The film's intertextuality extends far beyond the Renaissance, linking the heroine by her name both to the revolutionary spirit of Goya (she refuses to be limited by her age, class and sex and succeeds in rebelling against her oppressors) and to Nabokov's crass little nymphet Lolita (Goyita makes Don Alejandro burn his wife's possessions and leave his estate to her). She also evokes the romantic bird girl Rima from Hudson's *Green Mansions* and other variations of La Belle Dame Sans Merci. Though she makes the Don acknowledge the sexual dimension of their relationship (in one scene, she asks him directly whether he likes her "as a woman" and then tells him he may kiss her), their romance is never sexually consummated. In the early stages, the affair stimulates Don Alejandro to visit his mistress in Salamanca much earlier than usual; later, when he becomes totally immersed in his romantic obsession, he loses interest in this other woman and in sex. Repeatedly, Goyita forces him to treat her as an adult. Whenever he makes a remark that is in any way patronizing, she says "Adios" and turns to leave, causing him to run after

Ana Torrent in El Nido *(The Nest)*

her, apologize and acknowledge her equality. Rather than being sexual in nature, her power is primarily based on a precocious intelligence, authoritarianism and intensity, which almost seem tinged with the supernatural. She possesses a spiritual fire that is capable of fueling any kind of passion. We might even suspect that she, like Lady Macbeth, has symbolic affinities with Shakespeare's weird sisters. When the school teacher confides in Don Alejandro that she chose Goyita to play Lady Macbeth, because "she's wicked enough to understand the part," he observes: "I've always thought that women were more intelligent than men . . . and more evil."

Despite these demonic dimensions, Goyita is simultaneously presented as a young adolescent full of typical romantic fantasies, playing the same games familiar to most children, but transforming them with her extraordinary passion. Just as the eccentric Don Alejandro walks the line between madness and romantic idealism, the willful Goyita obscures the boundary between egotistical child's play and obsessive romantic tragedy. Freud saw child's play and adult daydreaming as two precursors of artistic creativity, the latter being exchanged for the former as the person matured. But they both differed from conscious artistry in leaving the egotistic wish-fulfillment (which was either ambitious or erotic) very transparent.

> "The writer softens the character of his egoistic daydreams by altering and disguising it, and he bribes us by the purely formal—that is, aesthetic —yield of pleasure which he offers us in the presentation of his fantasies. We give the name of an *incentive bonus*, or a forepleasure, to a yield of pleasure such as this, which is offered to us so as to make possible the release of still greater pleasure arising from deeper psychical sources."[1]

Armiñán's achievement in *El Nido* is to couple child's play with adult fantasy, allowing the ambitious, erotic and egotistic wishfulfillments to remain fully transparent as they do in *Don Quixote* and *Macbeth*, yet redeeming the union through a masterful aesthetic control that is equally apparent. Both his hero and heroine strive for artistic expression: Don Alejandro fantasizes he is a conductor, while Goyita is a budding poet and actress. But, of course, it is Armiñán, himself, who provides the film's consummate artistry, which is expressed primarily through rigorous and economical narrative structure, witty and resonant dialogue, subtle characterizations developed through brilliant acting, dynamic camera movement, and patterns of recurring images that are visual, verbal, musical and narrative. The result is a very powerful film that arouses considerable pleasure, both of the aesthetic and psychic varieties, by fusing art and nature.

With the energy of an overture and with great virtuosity, the opening sequences combine all of these techniques to launch the plot and introduce the central conflict between art and nature. The opening image is a long shot of an idyllic landscape. A white horse, which will later come to represent Don Alejandro's spirit of chivalry, runs in the center of the frame, with white clouds in the sky and a symmetrical line of trees at the horizon. As we listen to Haydn's "The Creation" on the sound track, we watch the natural subject and camera move together harmoniously as if in a dance. Then the camera slowly pans right to a large house; as it moves in for a closer shot, we see through the window a silhouette of Don Alejandro vigorously conducting. The image dissolves to successively closer shots of the house until the window through which we are peering takes over the entire frame, focusing our attention on art and making the natural landscape disappear.

Nature reappears in the next sequence as we watch Don Alejandro riding the white horse through the same woods from the opening shot. This time we hear natural sounds rather than music—a running brook and chirping birds. As soon as Alejandro removes his hat and begins to conduct, the same music from the opening sequence takes over the sound track; once again, art dominates nature, which seems to give the Don great pleasure. The camera continually moves, performing lyrical circular pans, cutting from dizzying upward angles to symmetrical shots of the conductor framed by trees. As if the Spirit of the Woods were getting its revenge, an egg suddenly splatters on Alejandro's forehead, bringing the music to a sudden halt and comically deflating his performance. Yet it also marks the birth of his romantic quest, leading him to search for the culprit who threw the egg; the camera joins the hunt, representing his subjective point of view as he rummages through the bushes. Eventually he finds a red scarf hanging on a branch, and the camera pulls back to give us a broader perspective on this momentous discovery.

The cut to the next scene occurs on a zoom into the house, as if the camera were very eager to catch the next move in the game. Again we see through the window Don Alejandro conducting, but now we hear birds singing rather than Haydn's chorale. When the Don's gestures are deprived of the musical track, they become comical. This deflation is carried even

further once we get inside and see that he is performing in front of a tape deck, revealing he is only an imaginary conductor, not a real artist. This time his number is interrupted by an electronic buzzer, which signals that it is time for him to make his next move in a computerized game of chess. We realize that he is a lonely old man, filling his time with idle games of rational control. Yet we do not feel sorry for him because of his extraordinary intensity and pleasure in pursuing these activities and his total acceptance of and contentment with his solitude. These are precisely the values he will have to sacrifice for his romantic adventure, but they also display his qualifications for the role of tragic hero in the quest. The film's first line of dialogue is spoken to the machine and prefigures his double identification with Quixote, the Knight-errant, and Macbeth, who would be King: "Ah the King, I see what you're up to, but I won't fall into your trap . . . you didn't count on the Knight!" Turning from the chessboard to the scarf, he discovers an initial "G" and asks, "And who are you?" When his housekeeper enters the room, she interrupts his fantasy and provokes an irritable tirade. It is obvious that he prefers his symbolic objects to human companionship. She retorts, "If your wife were alive!," and the computer signals his next move, which is checkmate.

In the next sequence Don Alejandro sallies forth into the woods wearing the red scarf and searching for new love tokens. Much to his delight, he finds a series of clues that combine art and nature—a feather attached to a note bearing a cryptic rhyme and leading him on to the next sign. The third one reads: "The feather of a sparrow hawk/Will take you to the Tower walk." Not only do these notes provide the first description of Goyita (who looks like a sparrow but acts like a hawk), they also develop the bird imagery beyond the egg and foreshadow that Don Alejandro will have to pay dearly for this knight-errantry. In recovering one of the tokens, he falls into the river, which will later result in a terrible cold. Instead of being dismayed, he breaks into a huge grin that takes over his entire face and moves between idiocy and ecstasy. Rising from the river with grandeur, he dramatically and prophetically proclaims: "With 100 cannons on either side, full sail ahead!" Our hero is fully launched on the greatest adventure of his life, but it will end with his being cut down by machine-gun fire.

Two subsequent sequences illustrate the wonderful resonance and economy of Armiñán's dialogue, narrative structure and *mise en scène*. In the first, Don Alejandro goes to visit his friend Eladio, a Catholic priest, asking him to analyze the handwriting in the notes. As he enters the church, Alejandro hears the sound of tolling bells. Winding his way into an interior chamber, he finds the priest reading, with religious icons in the background and thin streams of light piercing his cigarette smoke, creating a heavy atmosphere and amber texture that are almost painterly. This choice of *mise en scène* gives a sacred cast to Alejandro's quest, as if the mystery and passion he pursues are a substitute for salvation. But the ironic dialogue deflates the beauty of the setting and begins to characterize each man and define their relationship.

ALEJANDRO: Hello, witch doctor.
ELADIO: Hello, heretic.
ALEJANDRO: Is this what they call the air of sanctity?

Symbolically Alejandro's greeting may cast Eladio in the role of the witches in the parallel with *Macbeth*. More realistically, however, the exchange reveals the same kind of relationship that Alejandro has with his housekeeper—a teasing antagonism that covers a mutual respect and affection based on years of friendship. These greetings also inform us that Alejandro is a nonbeliever, creating a philosophical tension with his friend that parallels the opposition between Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Like the housekeeper, Eladio deflates his friend's romantic quest by reminding him of his age. Ignoring this sarcasm, Alejandro presents Eladio with a box of candy, to which the priest responds: "It's the first time you gave me anything—are they poisoned?" Not only does the gift reveal the sensual side of Eladio's nature, which will be developed in later scenes and will help to qualify him for his role as Sancho, but it also shows how Alejandro's quest has already brought him out of his solitude and forced him to acknowledge his need for others, a realization that makes him more open and generous.

This sequence is also masterful in its hermeneutic function of providing us with dramatic exposition yet simultaneously heightening our curiosity about the mysterious heroine whom we have not yet seen. Eladio's analysis of her handwriting is comic yet prophetic in every detail. He tells us she is very young, hungry and dirty (he knows this because one of the notes is stained with salami), uncouth but gifted with a natural intelligence and a great sense of humor, authoritarian, headstrong, sensitive, passionate and possessive.

Even Eladio's curiosity is engaged, for it is he who deciphers the sparrow hawk's riddle and in the next scene leads Alejandro to the church tower. Despite his teasing skepticism, he has joined the Don's quest, like a faithful squire, and is the first to discover and decode the next prophetic message: "The greenfinch's flow/Will end up in a tragic show." Once deciphered, this note serves as an invitation to the school rehearsal of *Macbeth*, where the heroine makes her dramatic debut in one of the most brilliant sequences in the film.

As Don Alejandro sneaks into the school auditorium, we hear a young girl reciting a soliloquy. Though the husky adolescent voice occasionally cracks with uncertainty, it expresses a full understanding of the words it speaks.

> The raven himself is hoarse
> That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
> Under my battlements. Come, you spirits
> That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
> And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
> Of direst cruelty! (I,v,39-44)

The choice of passage is brilliant, for Armiñán makes the lines fit the film's context while retaining the demonic resonance of Shakespeare's tragedy. The opening allusion to the raven marks the speech as the climactic note that lures Alejandro into the romance. The allusion to the "fatal entrance of Duncan" just as the Don enters the room foreshadows that he, rather than the sergeant, will die. When the camera cuts to Goyita on stage in a blood-red sweater, we are simultaneously struck by the childishness of her body and the mature intelligence expressed in her eyes. Don Alejandro gapes at her in wonder. She seems acutely aware of his presence as soon as he enters the room, so much so that the teacher has to interrupt the speech to remind her, "You're waiting for Macbeth." As Goyita resumes the soliloquy, the camera intercuts between her and Alejandro, quickening in pace and moving closer in each time, as if they were the only ones present. Clearly she is playing the scene to him, completing her romantic conquest and casting him in the role of her murderous mate. Later, when Alejandro speaks to her in the school courtyard, he will signal his acceptance of both roles (as her lover and Macbeth) by quoting lines from the play: "Sleep no more, Macbeth does murder sleep." But while still in the auditorium, their romantic enchantment is broken by a cut to an extreme long shot of the stage, as the teacher coaches the little pipsqueak playing Macbeth to make his entrance, informing Goyita, "Macbeth is here!" Goyita continues to stare directly at Don Alejandro, fighting to maintain the spell of their private play and ignoring the deflating giggles of her childish peers.

It's an extraordinary acting performance by Ana Torrent. Though Héctor Alterio is also brilliant as Don Alejandro, as is Luis Poltti in the supporting role of Eladio, it is conceivable that other actors could have done equally well.[3] The case is different with Ana Torrent; it is almost impossible to imagine this film without her because her very existence *proves* that such a young girl is capable of such intelligence and passion. The creation of Goyita is a marvellous collaboration between Torrent and Armiñán (both as writer and director). He must have had Torrent in mind when he conceived of the role, for her earlier performances in Victor Erice's *El Espiritu de la Colmena* (*Spirit of the Beehive*), 1973, and Carlos Saura's *Cría Cuervos* (*Raise Ravens*), 1975, were equally stunning and also demanded that she combine a precocious emotional maturity with a fascination for the demonic.

The character of Goyita depends on a balance between Torrent's uniqueness and the mythic resonance of the games, codes and icons with which she is aligned. In case we don't perceive the extraordinary nature of the performance given by Torrent as Goyita, Armiñán powerfully dramatizes her irreplaceability in a later sequence that occurs after she has been sent out of town by her family. Again, Don Alejandro visits a rehearsal at the school auditorium, but this time the role of Lady Macbeth is played by Pilar, the teacher's favorite and Goyita's arch rival. Though she is also intelligent, Pilar totally lacks Goyita's emotional maturity and passion. She delivers the soliloquy mechanically, as if it were an exercise in rote memory without any understanding of the lines. Even the teacher is frustrated and threatens to "break ner neck" if she doesn't slow down. The contrast forces us to realize that without Goyita, the school play is silly and meaninglyess; Don Alejandro comes to exactly the same conclusion about his life. Without having to hear the actual lines quoted, we are reminded of the most famous passage from *Macbeth*—the King's reaction to the loss of his Lady.

> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
> Signifying nothing. (V,v,23-28)

This scene helps Don Alejandro decide to challenge the police sergeant and makes him totally indifferent to his own death.

In *El Nido* the subtlety of characterization and narrative development is frequently enhanced by camera moves and editing. We have already seen how this principle worked in the opening sequences, but it is most effective in two parallel scenes that develop the relationships between Goyita and her teacher and between Don Alejandro and the priest far beyond our conventional expectations.

The first scene occurs immediately after the teacher has discovered the initial "A" carved on Goyita's palm. Attractive, intelligent, and in her early twenties, the teacher is clearly a potential rival. She has been acutely aware of Don Alejandro's interest in Goyita and has even gone to visit him to find out more about his relationship with her pupil. Her motives seem to be mixed: a teacher's moral duty, a maternal interest in the girl, and personal jealousy. Aware of the potential rivalry and used to bitter power struggles with her own mother, Goyita has forbidden Don Alejandro to visit the school or speak to the teacher. The scene opens with a medium shot of the teacher painting trees on the sets for the play. When Goyita comes to help her, the teacher proposes a game designed to discover the nature of her relationship with Don Alejandro, yet this catechism is presented in the spirit of courtly romance: they will take turns asking each other questions, but always have to tell the truth and cannot reveal the answers to anyone else. Goyita gladly accepts the challenge, deftly showing how she can turn the game to her own advantage and use it to prove her intellectual and emotional equality with the teacher. At the beginning of the game we watch the two young women in long shot, but as the questions draw them into greater intimacy and our own involvement intensifies, the camera keeps moving in closer.

GOYITA: Who's your favorite?
TEACHER: Pilar.
GOYITA: Pilar Campos is an idiot!
TEACHER: Why don't you like school?
GOYITA: I don't like to be cooped up. . . . Do you dislike me?
TEACHER: No, I love you. Who is the A?
GOYITA: You already know. Alejandro. What's going to be on the exam?

The questions and camera moves control the subtle modulation of tone. From poignant questions and honest answers that reveal her vulnerability—her sibling rivalry with Pilar (reflecting her relationship with her younger sister), her desire for the teacher's love (to compensate for the open hostility that exists between her and her mother), her identification with caged birds—Goyita moves to a devious question about the exam, which temporarily re-establishes the adverserial student-teacher relationship, reminds us that she is still a rebellious child, and makes the camera pull back to a more detached view. After grudgingly answering this question, the teacher resumes her pursuit of the truth she seeks. Now that Goyita has forced her to acknowledge the purpose behind the game, the girl is free to ask equally personal questions and the camera continues to move in for more intimate close-ups.

EL NIDO

TEACHER: Does he have a G?
GOYITA: Yes. Why did you go to see him?
TEACHER: I wanted to see if he was bad. What do you do?
GOYITA: Talk, play, he tells me things. We listen to music, ride bikes, nothing else, I swear it. . . . Do you have a boyfriend?
TEACHER: I'm living with someone. . . .

At this moment of peak closeness, student and teacher have become equals, like two girl friends of the same age trading intimate secrets. The camera suddenly pulls back to an extreme long

EL NIDO

shot at a slightly downward angle, reminding us of the theatrical setting and how the scene began as a game. We see that Goyita's power works not only on Don Alejandro, but on anyone with imagination and intelligence. From this comic overview, we then return to a closer shot of the specific situation—a warning and a confession about the tragic romance that shift the tone and call attention to context, foreboding the worst for Alejandro.

TEACHER: In a western, they'd lynch him. Be careful.

GOYITA: We've broken up . . . because he doesn't do as I say.

The parallel scene between Don Alejandro and Eladio takes place in the churchyard immediately after the former has seen Pilar rehearsing Lady Macbeth. Like the scene between Goyita and the teacher, it is structured as a mutual confession, revealing deep similarities between the two men who originally seemed to be such opposites and a deeper love than we expected. Eladio teasingly greets his friend as "Judas" and quips, "You and I will end up in marriage!" Alejandro's confession moves through several stages and tones, with the camera moving in for greater intimacy and out for comical distance. The first stage is pure romantic melancholy. Presented in a medium shot, Alejandro confesses that he is lost and the priest tries to interest him in trout fishing, but the Don is interested in nothing but Goyita. The tone turns humorous when Alejandro confesses that he spent five years in a seminary and found "your colleagues were really animals!" Finding this revelation hysterically funny, Eladio makes him try on his robes and recite a prayer so that he can see how Alejandro would look as a priest. It's the same kind of reversal of roles that occurs in Part II of *Don Quixote*. When the camera pulls back to the proper comic distance for such buffoonery, it also reminds us that the setting is a graveyard. As if to signal a theatrical shift in tone, there is a sudden crack of thunder, which the priest playfully interprets as a divine condemnation of their blasphemy or as Alejandro's "holy ministers." The tone becomes more somber and the camera moves in for an intimate two-shot as Alejandro assesses his life and reveals that his marriage was a mistake, that the romance with Goyita is his first and only love, that he intends to leave her his fortune, and that Eladio is his only friend. The priest responds with a sincere blessing that functions as wise counsel, a true declaration of loving friendship, and the final rites of extreme unction. "Let me tell you something, really. You're the best person I know. I bless you in the name of the father, the son and the holy ghost. . . . You go to Salamanca."

We realize that we have been listening to the final confession of an atheist, whose soul has been redeemed by friendship and love and who now is preparing to face his death. Alejandro replies to the priest: "There's nothing for me in Salamanca or anywhere!"

The richness of the film is also developed through recurring images which work visually, verbally, narratively and musically. Perhaps the most significant image pattern is birds, which are evoked in the film's title, the sound track of the opening sequences, and in the first quotation from *Macbeth*. Goyita gains much of her power by being a bird girl, a romantic child of nature—by gathering nests, by being able to distinguish feathers and songs of every species, by identifying with all kinds of birds whether caged or wild, by throwing an egg and composing bird poems to catch a lover. When Don Alejandro buys a book on ornithology so that he can learn how to better distinguish the various species, Goyita is annoyed, for she fears this will lessen her power over him. She clearly has a superior knowledge of nature (also demonstrated in a classroom scene where she lectures on plants) but has to rely on the Don to teach her table manners.

This special knowledge of birds undoubtedly led her to select Don Alejandro as her game. She tells him she knew his wife for many years, accusing her of being snobbish and of stealing her nests. Goyita harshly condemn's Isabel's practice of putting nests behind glass: "Nests out of trees are horrible!" Like the teacher, Isabel obviously has been both a model and an object of intense rivalry—another surrogate mother, an association which strengthens Goyita's Oedipal attraction to Alejandro.

Don Alejandro and the Sergeant, the two men who function as father surrogates for Goyita, are first brought together in a shop full of caged birds; both men perceive her strength (one with love, the other with fear) and both are ensnared in her tragic Oedipal game. Like her pet eagle, the Don becomes the object of her romantic attentions: both are captured and trained, and their natural superiority enhances her power as their Mistress. After a bitter family quarrel in which her mother punishes her while her father remains silent, Goyita turns for affection to her eagle, kissing it and speaking tenderly: "Are you hungry? Don't worry, I'll take care of you. I'll teach you how to fly." These loving words

would apply equally well to Alejandro, whom she teaches how to love. Yet she dominates him the way her mother henpecks her father, only in a more loving manner that is compatible with the tradition of chivalric romance.

The sergeant is associated with ominous birds of prey—the raven and the hawk. The intensity of hatred between Goyita and her enemy probably masks a sexual attraction. Like her mother, she realizes that he exerts the power and authority her weak father lacks; yet instead of respecting and courting him like her mother, she rebels. As the civil officer of the city and as the tyrannical boss who repeatedly humiliates her father, the sergeant quite literally represents the highest patriarchal authority over Goyita. In her battle against him, she enlists as allies the imperial eagle, the natural lord among birds, and Don Alejandro, an eccentric aristocrat, but both become pawns in the game. The sergeant resents her keeping a caged bird of such power, as if it somehow lessens his own authority; eventually he takes the eagle and lets it go. Similarly, he complains to her father that Goyita's romance with Don Alejandro is "making us look absurd." He confiscates the love token that the Don had given her—a medal from a French concentration camp, also associated with entrapment. Finally, with Goyita's father by his side, the sergeant responds to Don Alejandro's challenge by gunning him down; it is the father who discovers that the Don's rifle contained nothing but blanks. He immediately understands the Don's noble gesture because he himself had earlier faked a beating of Goyita in order to please his demanding wife.

The film ends with two sequences that pay homage to the Don in contrasting tones. A funeral procession provides the tragic perspective. Don Alejandro's corpse is carried through town by a wagon led by the priest and the two policemen, with the white horse tethered behind. As the wagon passes by, people take off their hats in respect; the teacher looks on in wise sadness, seeing that her prediction has come true, and the mistress from Salamanca sits in her car weeping. The scene fades to black.

The final sequence lyrically affirms Don Alejandro's transcendence, implying a comic acceptance of death as part of the natural cycle. The first shot repeats the aerial view from the opening sequence; we see the white horse, Alejandro's spirit of chivalry, running freely across the landscape. Then the film cuts to Goyita approaching the place on the hill where Don Alejandro first taught her how to conduct. She is wearing a white translucent sweater that reveals her lithe body has matured. At first we hear only the wind, but then Goyita speaks softly to the stone monument, as she earlier spoke to her eagle: "Hi, Alejandro. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. I haven't met anyone in all this time and never will, never. Eccentric, you're an eccentric. You've taught me another new word. It also starts with 'A.' I'm allowed to say it—Amor."

Deepening the "A" cut into her palm, she places her hand on the stone and reaffirms their secret pact, but the final confirmation is musical. As she stands on the stone and begins to conduct, Haydn's "Creation" takes over the sound track, and the camera makes a series of lyrical sweeps before pulling away in an extreme long shot, then rhythmically intercuts between the white horse running in a circle, Goyita conducting, and finally the horse running freely beneath the clouds and along the symmetrical line of trees. This peaceful union of art and nature closes the circle of the narrative structure with joyful harmony.

El Nido is a marvellously intelligent film that avoids all clichés and delights both with its sophisticated artistry and its primordial childish fantasies of unlimited power and eternal love. —MARSHA KINDER

NOTES

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2. I have seen Héctor Alterio in only one other film—Jaime Chavarri's *A Un Dios Desconocido* (*To an Unknown God*), 1977, but will never forget his peformance, which won the "Best Actor Award" at the San Sebastian Film Festival that year. There he played a middle-aged homosexual magician haunted by a childhood love for another boy, which was mysteriously linked to the murder of Federico Garcia Lorca. Both in that film and in *El Nido,* he displays an incredible range of expressiveness in his face, body and voice that is capable of moving from the deepest melancholy to the most ecstatic joy.

DRESSED TO KILL

Director: Brian De Palma. Script: De Palma. Producer: George Litto. Photography: Ralf Bode. Music: Pino Donaggio. Filmways.

Just as Hitchcock's reputation was established, or at least greatly enhanced, by the claim of such auteurist critics as Truffaut, Chabrol and Robin Wood that the director repeatedly transcended the genre in which he was operating,

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Just as Hitchcock's reputation was established, or at least greatly enhanced, by the claim of such auteurist critics as Truffaut, Chabrol and Robin Wood that the director repeatedly transcended the genre in which he was operating,

so too Brian de Palma's work increasingly demands assessment on a broadly authorial basis as, paradoxically, it seems increasingly to borrow from, or embroider on, Hitchcock. The self-conscious advertisement of the Hitchcock *hommages* by de Palma may lull us into believing that the latter may be explained purely by reference to the former director, that his success or failure may be related to the degree of skill with which he surmounts the manifest technical obstacles of producing Hitchcockian effects from basically Hitchcockian material while maintaining enough freshness of approach and novelty of treatment to surprise an audience educated in Hitchcock.

The end of one of the key sequences of *Dressed To Kill* suggests a nod to the cognoscenti, an in-joke about borrowed garments. As the Angie Dickinson character leaves New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, she discards a glove, which is picked up and retained, on her departure, by another blonde. The eagerness with which the cast-off is reclaimed hints at the self-conscious relation of de Palma to Hitchcock, the retrieval and jealous guarding of the latter's effects and "big sequences" by the former, the wearing by de Palma of Hitchcock's hand-me-downs. More than any other contemporary American director, including Bogdanovich, de Palma invites knowledge of other directors for comprehension of his films. He positively demands knowledge of Hitchcock. His apparent contentment to be no more than one of Hitch's disciples has earned him far less critical attention than the ex-*Cahiers* directors achieved with even their most overt *hommages* to the master, presumably since their reputations were well established before, say, *La Sirène de Mississippi* or *La Décade prodigieuse*. De Palma's less obviously Hitchcockian movies, *Phantom of the Paradise, Sisters, Carrie* and *The Fury*, have found a niche only as cult successes.[1] His *Obsession* can with some justice be viewed as essentially the resurrection of what is today, in the most straightforward physical sense, the least accessible of Hitchcock's American movies, *Vertigo*. Precisely twenty years after *Psycho*, in the year of Hitchcock's death, it would appear that, with *Dressed To Kill*, the supreme tribute is offered in the apparent reworking of that supremely esteemed work.

Indeed, two considerable challenges thrown down by *Psycho* seem to be recognized and met. That is, de Palma succeeds in shocking a sophisticated post-*Psycho* audience by eliminating a principal character as unexpectedly as Hitchcock did Norma Crane, and he creates a sequence in an elevator as unpleasantly haunting as the celebrated shower murder.

Kate Miller (Angie Dickinson) appears to be Norma Crane's equivalent. She is blonde, cool, elegant, dissatisfied with the restrictions imposed on her by her present way of life and, like the Janet Leigh character, ready to grab the suddenly presented chance of changing it. If her departure from her former manner of life is potentially less startling than Norma Crane's, since no theft is involved and only an afternoon's dalliance contemplated, significance is augmented for the audience by its knowledge of her hitherto unblemished record as wife, mother and daughter, despite her sense of at least two of these roles' oppressiveness.

Moreover, the sequence in the Metropolitan Museum, remarkable for the boldness of its subject-matter but especially for its rhythms, bristles with Hitchcock references. It begins slowly with quiet, amused but detached observation (like James Stewart's in the earlier sequences of *Rear Window*) by a seated Kate of other visitors to the Museum, of a young couple in love, of a bored Oriental child eluding and alarming her formerly preoccupied parents, of a man attempting a pickup. This is followed by a central section in which a handsome stranger sits by Kate. Close-ups predominate—of their feet, of her face (hopeful, flirtatious, unsure, disappointed), of his (enigmatic), and then of her legs as she drops her glove. The audience is reminded of the fairground "flirtation" between Robert Walker and his victim in *Strangers on a Train*, a point emphasized by the close-up of the stranger's co-respondent shoes next to Dickinson's, just as Walker's brushed against Farley Granger's shoes in a Hitchcock film where the sexual undertones (of Walker's fascination with the tennis-pro hero) are some 25 years later made explicit in the equally titillating notion of a predatory female cruising her prey.

Once the stranger abruptly makes his departure, the final section involves a multiplicity of *Marnie*-like tracking shots through room after room of the Museum, as Kate pursues her quarry, loses him, finds him, feels she is pursued in turn, finds she is not, is startled by his gloved hand on her shoulder and frightened away, only to recall that he is wearing her glove and that his intentions are indeed flirtatious. So much energy is invested in this sequence, so completely do we identify with the heroine and her changing sentiments, that the casual pickup becomes a major event. When the taxi in which Kate has already achieved

orgasm draws up at the building in which the stranger lives, its appearance promises cataclysm. The camera beholds it and moves in slowly upon it with the sense of occasion with which it approached the Phoenix apartment in which *Psycho* opened or, more relevantly, the building where the Anna Massey character dies unseen in *Frenzy*.

Like Hitchcock's best work, *Dressed To Kill* both provokes and strokes its audience, showing it to be less clever than it believes at some points while cajoling it at others. Thus, for all the confusion it creates about the level at which key moments in the movie are to be taken, the least imaginative member of the audience—from memories of *Psycho* and frequent visual clues—should early on be able to guess the identity of the killer though over-confidence about that identity may from time to time be dispelled. The parody of what may well already have been parody in *Psycho*—the psychiatrist's explanation of the murderer's personality—and the scene in which a woman becomes nauseated as she overhears a casual chat about the grislier aspects of trans-sexual surgery, seem uncomfortably ingratiating, the one a wink to the cinemanes, the other (as arch in its humor and as unsettling as the inspector's wife's horrendous attempts at gourmet cookery of dismembered octopi, etc., in *Frenzy*) a pat on the back to an audience which has survived the visual shocks of the elevator sequence without, presumably, turning tail.

De Palma, whatever the common sympathies, the common religious background in Roman Catholicism, or the technical challenges which draw him to Hitchcock, is for better or worse not Hitchcock. While, to understand de Palma, it is necessary to trace the limits of his relationship with Hitchcock, it is shortsighted to be content with that initial exercise. It is the differences from his master, the points of departure, that are most illuminating and suggestive of de Palma's particular concerns and strategies.

If *Carrie* and *Dressed To Kill* are of the horror genre, too violent and dark to be classified with the more extrovert "thriller," much of their force lies in those passages where a quite different tradition, that of romantic melodrama, seems to be invoked. Both movies begin in a shower. However, this is not the *Psycho* type of shower, all needle-like spray, clinical tiles, lavatorial drain, piercing bird cries. In *Carrie,* a pubescent girl succumbs to the voluptuous warmth of the shower, soaping her smooth thighs and caressing her body in languorous slow motion. In *Dressed To Kill,*

Angie Dickinson in DRESSED TO KILL

after the serenity of the opening titles against their plain background underlined by Pino Donaggio's lushly romantic main theme on the sound track, the camera tracks with measured stateliness, as maddening in its deliberateness as the similarly motivated tracks in *Obsession,* to a bathroom in which a bare-chested man shaves while a naked Angie Dickinson dreamily explores her body under the shower. Instead of Bernard Herrmann's spiky, shrill assaults on the ear,[2] we remain wrapped in the breathy amorousness of Donaggio's score, observing the heroine's rapt gaze, her dream state. Both heroines are, in fact, masturbating. These opening sequences suggest at least two facets of de Palma's more recent work.

Firstly, while romance is always a prominent element, his movies seem ultimately to be a critique rather than a celebration of it and to suggest that the romantic is capable of sustaining a particular view of the world only temporarily and only so long as his or her onanism remains uninterrupted by actuality. Thus, the kitschiness with which he presents his romantic elements—the hackneyed use of slow motion and soft focus to express teenage rapture at the prom in *Carrie,* the cloying wordless choir on the *Dressed To Kill* sound track, the equally wordless, vacuously hand-

some pickup at the Metropolitan Museum, a *Vogue* model, man reduced to fashion accessory for the self-regarding female—is integral, a clue to the message that the romantic is literally dreaming, and that the surrender to dream, achieved at the expense of actuality, is also potential surrender to the obverse, nightmare. The very title, *Obsession,* indicates de Palma's paramount concern with his hero's private fantasy of recreating his lost wife, and the climax of that movie is an awakening to a different, but as fulfilling, actuality. Since this movie, the dreams are more pervasive, the awakenings progressively more alarming.

Then, too, the way in which the opening sequences above end suggests a second, concomitant aspect. The teenager surrendering to the charms of her own flesh suddenly begins to bleed; her mature counterpart is suddenly attacked by an anonymous male assailant while her husband watches unperturbed. These examples suggest a particularly insidious and virulent puritanism. The traditional fates for teenage male masturbators range from acne to blindness. What more fitting, then, than the connection of self-arousal with its apparent penalty, a first experience of menstruation? When Norma Crane was done to death in *Psycho,* she was—or so the symbolism of the toilet bowl and shower-bath suggested—purged of her sins. Kate Miller, model submissive member of the family, pays for her one deviation by being slashed to death. In context, her path to destruction is signalled by the discovery which terminates her illusion of romance, the coldly impersonal notification of her gallant's venereal disease. She is morally and physically polluted from the moment of that discovery, unable to talk to her husband on the telephone or to tolerate the accusatory stare of a little girl in the elevator. Norma Crane's repeated adultery and theft are "forgiven," mere foibles in relation to Kate's afternoon of sexual fulfilment.

Who, in all seriousness, could justify such monumental punishment for such trivial offence? Who but a religious fanatic? The one overt religious fanatic in de Palma's movies, the Piper Laurie character in *Carrie,* could have directed its prom sequences, from the falsely glowing images of teenage love to the demonstration of Providence's mockery of human hope and the inexorability of punishment. Carrie, dripping in pig's blood, her escort dead on the platform beside her, is the summation of every parental or priestly warning of the fate in store for disobedient girls, girls who disregard their mothers and choose the way of the flesh. Every Catholic sermon about the perils of fleshly indulgence pales beside the demise of Kate Miller, a woman who found her husband's embraces tedious, her mother's impending visit depressing and who, above all, forgot about a lunch date with her mother-in-law in order to indulge her carnality.

At one level, then, de Palma's horror stories are morality tales, Grimms' fairy tales for the high school, homilies addressed to the adolescent audience by the parish priest. They exploit the most private fears of the pubescent —fear of ridicule or ostracization by one's peers, fear of discovery in the act of masturbation or of visible punishment for the practice, of losing the love of a parent—and touch upon culturally more ubiquitous dreads, such as incest (the Cliff Robertson character's love for his "wife"/daughter in *Obsession*) and matricide (*Carrie*). *Dressed To Kill* is, at bottom, a terrifying and savagely simple morality for children, the story of the girl who, like Carrie, disobeys her mother and runs away from home. The little Oriental girl who runs away from her parents in the heroine's sight at the Museum is only a version of herself, did she but know it. Significantly, just before her death and following her afternoon of illicit love, a little girl sharing the elevator stares accusingly at Kate. The fall from grace is immediate, irrevocable and, to children especially, evident. White magic is the weapon of the innocent, as in fairy tales; the misunderstood children of *The Fury,* the blood-drenched Cinderella of *Carrie,* use their telekinetic powers to devastate the irredeemable, offering the audience the vicarious satisfaction—peculiarly attractive to the young—of butchering high-school bullies and teachers or of exploding a villain's head as if it were a watermelon. Peter Miller's technological wizardry in *Dressed To Kill* is exactly that, magic at the service of the pure in heart.

At one level, yes. At another, de Palma cannot stay comfortably in the pulpit. He becomes the bright lapsed Catholic who cannot retain credence in hellfire sermons and yet cannot leave the religion which dominated his early years alone, a form of North American Buñuel. His undermining of his own stern moralities is, increasingly, achieved by excess, an excess which threatens to disrupt the narrative and which, in his latest movie, fulfills that threat at least twice. The first third of *Dressed To Kill* is so disturbing to everybody who has spent, or even thought of spending, an afternoon in irresponsible sexual pleasure, that the

Boy electronics wizard and high-priced call girl: DRESSED TO KILL

playfulness of the major part of the movie seems almost insensitive. In effect, it defuses the intolerable guilt engendered in any modern audience. The whiff of brimstone is dispelled. The sunniness of the happy-hooker character, a perfect contrast in her hard-headed pragmatism with Kate Miller's romantic, invites us to shake ourselves free of the glimpses of the Inferno that still haunt us.

Ultimately, de Palma is exploring the very experience of movies, recognizing with the French surrealists the eroticism of the cinema and its invitation to voyeurism and masturbation. The emphasis on the voyeuristic in the Museum sequence, with Kate irresponsibly watching the lives of others and then the taxi driver's eager witnessing of her seduction in the back of his cab, draws attention to the audience's own voyeurism in the opening sequence.[3] Partly, the movie seduces us into ogling Angie Dickinson's nakedness and then "punishes" us by casting doubt on the reality of what we have witnessed. We seem to be forced to "place" or "read" the shower sequence, which ends with a murderous attack on Kate, in order to make sense of the prosaic scene immediately after, of Kate submitting to her husband's perfunctory lovemaking. The only conclusion seems to be that we have witnessed a flash-forward, and that we are now about to begin to be informed throughout the rest of the movie why the husband has set his wife up for such bizarre punishment at the hands of another man, presumably the wife's lover. The end of the shower sequence, moving from flurried and violent action into prolonged darkness, by all the traditional codes of cinema would appear to indicate that there is a passage of time, whether backward of forward, between shower sequence and bed sequence. Because there is no further allusion to the opening sequence, however, we are immediately after or during Kate's murder forced to reinterpret the sequence. If we attempt to incorporate it on a straightforward narrative level, we have to categorize it afresh as fantasy rather than flash-forward. In retrospect, it may seem peculiarly appropriate that a movie centering on the catastrophe occasioned by a bourgeoise's afternoon affair should (eventually) echo the opening sequences of *Belle de Jour,* where the heroine's humiliation by servants at her husband's orders turns out to be imagined by her while she lies in bed listlessly watching that meticulous young husband. However, neither this sequence nor the final shower sequence can credibly be read simply and literally as products of a particular woman's fantasy. Rather, the director's concerns seem to have irrupted into the narrative, alerting the audience to his interest in levels of reality and of consciousness. Despite the prosaic cop's belief that Kate was "looking to get herself killed," it seems impossible to fit the opening sequence into a simple cohesive narrative structure, partly because the cop *is* prosaic, and neither Kate nor the first third of the movie fits his kind of logic.

The final dream sequence is particularly instructive. In the mental-hospital scenes, excess is the rule. The eerie blue light, the dribbling, grinning inmates, the kinkiness of the dead nurse's undergarments, come from the school of Ken Russell. Signals of oneirism and of unreality are legion but the audience must wilfully ignore them in order to "enjoy" the final shower sequence and its terror. The awakenings at the end of this movie and of *Carrie* are both, self-evidently, jokes at the expense of the audience. They are also a commentary on the experience of leaving a cinema, of wakening from the substitute reality of the celluloid dream-world. Cliff Robertson's awakening from his obsession is firmly "within" the narrative at the end of that movie but de Palma has progressed to bolder strategies in his later movies. In the shock endings in these, de Palma achieves something of the effect of the eyeball-slitting in *Un Chien andalou,* but remains roguish rather than diabolic. His moralism, impossible to sustain at the literal level of his characters' conduct, is deflected to an attitude towards the workings of film itself. If movie-going is a form of romanticism, representing a surrender to a dream, the pursuit of the beautiful without responsibility or participation, there are always penalties, the most obvious being that a dreamer must always waken to actuality, unless, of course, the dreamer dies. He adds to the obvious another, that the moment where the dream ends and actuality begins can become blurred, the nightmare images can encroach on comfortable reality.

—KENNETH MACKINNON

NOTES

1. Indeed, few examples of the horror-film genre to which these are commonly assigned are afforded much general critical interest or respect, unless they are made by a director with an already secure reputation. Obvious examples are Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and, of course, *The Birds.*

2. When Herrmann wrote a score for de Palma, that of *Obsession,* it turned out to be notably more restrained, largo and somber than his work for Hitchcock.

3. The solitariness of the voyeuristic masturbator is echoed even in the presentation of the killer, whose belief that he is carrying on a transaction with another being turns out mockingly false.

BAD TIMING/A SENSUAL OBSESSION

Director: Nicholas Roeg. Producer: Jeremy Thomas. Script: Yale Udoff. Photography: Anthony Richmond. Editing: Tony Lawson. Music: Richard Hartley. World Northal.

Nicholas Roeg's latest film, *Bad Timing/A Sensual Obsession,* has generated passionate response, from avid praise to severe condemnation. It won top prize at the 1980 Toronto Film Festival and some critics have called it "the ultimate detective film," and Roeg's best work. Yet others were too offended to review the film because of its violent misogyny, while even some ardent Roeg fans found it a terrible disappointment. This essay will explore some of the reasons why the film aroused such contradictory reactions.

Bad Timing presents the erotic memories of a Freudian psychoanalyst, Dr. Alex Linden (Art Garfunkel), and the fantasies of a police inspector, Friedrich Netusil (Harvey Keitel), which both focus on Milena Flaherty (Theresa Russell), a sensual and vivacious young woman, as the object of their desire. What is most frightening about the film is that its camerawork, associative editing and narrative structure relentlessly reinforce and participate in this sensual obsession with Milena from the opening images (as Alex hovers over her) to the closing moments of the film (silent confrontation with and farewell to Alex), compelling us in the audience to identify with this assault on the female victim. On the one hand, this strategy leads to fast-paced, visually dazzling cinema full of intensity and excitement. Yet it also makes some of us very uncomfortable to be drawn into a complicity with these male predators. This latter reaction is particularly common among feminists and also among Roeg fans who have tended to associate his experimental filmmaking with enlightened consciousness.

Bad Timing compares the analytical professions of detection and psychoanalysis practiced by each man. Both characters become involved in a strong form of counter-transference with their suspect and client (respectively), which leads them both into obsessiveness, projection and voyeurism—behavior that is also encouraged in audiences of popular cinema. The film ultimately suggests that detective work does not discover the truth, but manufactures its own version of it. For through his voyeuristic fantasies and his growing sexual obsession with Milena, Inspector Netusil restructures the relationship between Milena and Alex the way he envisions it. The film implies, too, that psychoanalysis is another form of

The final dream sequence is particularly instructive. In the mental-hospital scenes, excess is the rule. The eerie blue light, the dribbling, grinning inmates, the kinkiness of the dead nurse's undergarments, come from the school of Ken Russell. Signals of oneirism and of unreality are legion but the audience must wilfully ignore them in order to "enjoy" the final shower sequence and its terror. The awakenings at the end of this movie and of *Carrie* are both, self-evidently, jokes at the expense of the audience. They are also a commentary on the experience of leaving a cinema, of wakening from the substitute reality of the celluloid dream-world. Cliff Robertson's awakening from his obsession is firmly "within" the narrative at the end of that movie but de Palma has progressed to bolder strategies in his later movies. In the shock endings in these, de Palma achieves something of the effect of the eyeball-slitting in *Un Chien andalou,* but remains roguish rather than diabolic. His moralism, impossible to sustain at the literal level of his characters' conduct, is deflected to an attitude towards the workings of film itself. If movie-going is a form of romanticism, representing a surrender to a dream, the pursuit of the beautiful without responsibility or participation, there are always penalties, the most obvious being that a dreamer must always waken to actuality, unless, of course, the dreamer dies. He adds to the obvious another, that the moment where the dream ends and actuality begins can become blurred, the nightmare images can encroach on comfortable reality.

—KENNETH MACKINNON

NOTES

1. Indeed, few examples of the horror-film genre to which these are commonly assigned are afforded much general critical interest or respect, unless they are made by a director with an already secure reputation. Obvious examples are Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and, of course, *The Birds.*

2. When Herrmann wrote a score for de Palma, that of *Obsession,* it turned out to be notably more restrained, largo and somber than his work for Hitchcock.

3. The solitariness of the voyeuristic masturbator is echoed even in the presentation of the killer, whose belief that he is carrying on a transaction with another being turns out mockingly false.

BAD TIMING/A SENSUAL OBSESSION

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voyeurism which leads the analyst into an obsession to control his client. For Alex Linden's memories develop into a vicious assault on Milena as his client/lover/victim. Roeg's camera expresses or is dominated by the desires of both men. It invites us to identify with Netusil's fantasies, and also reinforces Alex's cross-examination and assault on Milena. The film begins with Alex's flashbacks, but gradually shifts into Netusil's fantasies, culminating in an enactment of their mutual desire, the rape of Milena. Whereas in Roeg's first film *Performance,* a similar merger between the perspectives and identities of a gangster and a rock star led to expanded perception and growth, here the fusion of viewpoints only narrows and intensifies the obsession.

Bad Timing essentially begins in an ambulance which is rushing Milena to the hospital; Alex watches, sitting near her. His role as spectator immediately invites us to identify with him rather than with her. Like us, he is in a state of suspense, waiting to find out whether she will survive a suicide attempt. Once in the hospital, his fragmented recollections of their affair take over the narrative. Intercut with the flashback sequences where Alex and Milena are together, frequently making love, are the hospital sequences where the doctors try to resuscitate her. The life-sustaining efforts ironically appear life-draining. Milena's throat is slashed open for tracheotomy. Her face is pale, she appears dead, and blood spurts from her throat. In the scene immediately prior to this one, where they are making love, Alex bites Milena on the neck. Roeg's editing links sex with blood-letting, suggesting vampirism and death, but also implying a painful rape. Any pleasure or joy of love-making is undercut by the horror of this bloody assault. The idea of rape is further reinforced in another love-making sequence intercut by the hospital scene where a speculum is inserted into Milena's vagina. Her moans during love-making become her gagging and coughing up of blood in the hospital. This juxtaposition suggests that Roeg's camera and Alex are working together in a two-pronged assault. The camera reinforces Alex's behavior in two ways: (1) since they both assault Milena, the camera functions as an extension of Alex's memories; (2) the camera is also the means through which Alex reveals his memories to us, or the visual translator of Alex's thoughts.

Although Roeg's camerawork, editing and narrative structure seem to conspire with Alex and encourage us to identify with him, we gradually become aware of a number of disturbing things which make us question the reliability of his perspective. For one thing, Alex's flashbacks begin with voyeurism: he watches Milena from across the street, or from another room in a nightclub where she enjoys herself with friends or necks with a boyfriend. Driven by his will to control her, Alex probes deeper into Milena's life. He records her voice and plays it back at his pleasure; he steals pictures of Milena's brother and her estranged husband, Stefan. Spying on Milena and Stefan, Alex reads confidential information on them and prepares a file on them. The authorities for whom he makes these inquiries remain mysterious, perhaps suggesting that they are creations of Alex's paranoid fantasies. Despite all his probing, Milena's behavior and motives always elude analysis; she remains an object of mystery both for Alex and the audience. This elusiveness not only intensifies his obsession, but also makes her ripe for projection. Alex accuses Milena of not wanting to face the things he wants to talk about, yet when she wants to talk (and not make love), it is Alex who walks out of her apartment. Although he accuses her of never changing, the film clearly shows that it is Alex who is rigid and inflexible: he is characteristically sullen (when he cannot have his way), and consistently critical of Milena. She, on the other hand, is actually unpredictable and whimsical, qualities which make it more difficult for him to control her.

Teresa Russell, Art Garfunkel: BAD TIMING

Our doubts about Alex's reliability are reinforced by another contradiction concerning the issue of who is the aggressor in the romance. According to Alex's flashbacks, it is Milena who initially comes on to him sexually. The first time they see each other, she gives him the eye and says, "We're going to meet," gives him her number, and even calls him for their first rendez-vous. She picks him up at his apartment or in nightclubs. She beckons him

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into her bathroom for a sexual frolic. But gradually we realize that Alex's passivity repeatedly provokes her aggression, which then in turn justifies his own violent response. This dynamic controls one of the film's most powerful scenes. It begins with Alex coming to visit Milena, wanting to make love. For once, she is not in the mood but prefers to talk. Disappointed and annoyed, he leaves her apartment and begins walking down the stairs. Frustrated and angry that his will always dominates, she chases after him and urges him to make it with her right there on the stairs. Sexually aroused, Alex rapes her in a frenzy; it's as if all the bickering and resistance has served as foreplay to heighten his pleasure in fulfilling his original desire.

This same dynamic is repeated in a later scene where Milena dresses up as vampire/whore. She is sassy and giggly and heaves a large padlock and key at him (in effect, mocking his desires). Disgusted with her behavior, Alex walks out, working Milena into a frenzy. She threatens to kill herself, as Alex watches from the street below. Milena explodes into a rage, screaming, "Leave and you kill me, leave and I'm dead." Hysterical, she hurls bottle after bottle into the street where Alex stands. He watches this hysterical behavior as if he were an "innocent bystander"; he sees himself as her victim or as the reasonable doctor who diagnoses Milena as a "crazy bitch." Yet her fury has been carefully orchestrated by his passivity. Paradoxically, his relentless pursuit has driven her to a desperate state of dependence and helplessness—a condition that ultimately leads her to suicide.

Just as we begin to doubt Alex's reliability as a narrator, we are presented with Inspector Netusil as an alternative for audience identification. This process of transference is accomplished subtly by editing and camerawork and facilitated by the Inspector's tendency to identify with his suspect. The first sign occurs on the level of narrative: we realize that the key question is no longer whether Milena will survive, but rather whether she is a victim of suicide or foul play. Netusil develops our doubts about Alex's reliability into a full-blown suspicion of murder, which is partly fueled by his own hostility toward women. One of the first remarks he makes to Alex about Milena is clearly misogynistic: "They (women) challenge our will to master reality."

Since he is accusing Alex of murder and giving the audience another perspective with which to identify, Netusil seems to offer us a means of escaping complicity in the assault on Milena. In his fantasies about the couple, he seems to enjoy making Alex look foolish, as if it makes Netusil feel superior. This tendency is most powerfully demonstrated in the Morocco fantasy, which can be interpreted as generating from Netusil's point of view. The sequence begins in Milena's apartment as the inspector is looking through her things; he pours sand

from a rock into his hand, which dissolves into a shot of Alex walking on a sand dune in Morocco. Further evidence that this is Netusil's fantasy is the fact that the room in the hotel where Alex and Milena stay is strikingly similar to her apartment, only the decor is different. How does Netusil humiliate Alex? Alex rides in the back of a pick-up with a goat, helpless, silly-looking, while Milena is fondled by two Arabs. Netusil makes Alex seem dull: that night, Alex tells a long, boring story from his childhood to Milena. Milena sneezes and sprays the air, as if to rid the air of Alex's empty words. Netusil makes Alex unhappy: the next day Milena turns down Alex's proposal for marriage. He becomes angry and acts like a little boy who cannot have his way. Alex is not enjoying Morocco, while Milena is. The implications are that since Netusil has been making little headway with his interrogation of Alex in the hospital, he creates situations where Alex appears inferior, childish, boring and miserable, much like the situations in Alex's memories where Milena is forced to act the same way.

Yet by the time that Netusil's fantasies capture the narrative we realize that he is also suspect—that he merely contributes another dimension to the vampirish attack against Milena. Having formulated his own ideas about their relationship from police records and his questioning of Alex, he himself becomes obsessed with Milena. As he visualizes the scene in which Alex rapes Milena on the stairs, he identifies with Alex and vicariously enjoys the violence. Thus once again we in the audience, who have identified both with Alex and Netusil, are forced to confront our own complicity in these acts of voyeurism and projection.

The climactic sequence in which Alex rapes Milena while she is unconscious is a morbid-erotic collaboration among Netusil's fantasies, Alex's memories, and Roeg's camerawork and editing, which orchestrate the violence, and fuse the consciousness of detective, analyst and audience. When the two men confront each other in Milena's apartment, the scene of the crime, Alex becomes withdrawn and increasingly reluctant to speak, while Netusil goes into a trance, losing control of his professional persona. He makes strange statements such as, "The law doesn't interest me," or "I am not so good a detective," as if preparing for his imaginative reconstruction of the crime in which he will identify with the rapist. While the sequence may be a visualization of Netusil's hypothesis it clearly proves how Alex's manip-

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ulative dynamics—the ones we have seen demonstrated in some of the earlier flashbacks—now prove consciously criminal. After Milena takes the overdose, she phones Alex for help and makes him fully aware of the seriousness of her condition. Yet he casually waits almost two hours to go to her place, knowing the extent of the development of her coma during this time. When he does arrive, she is barely able to speak, and is almost unconscious. She crawls across the floor to phone for help, but Alex casually pulls out the plug. After she passes out, Alex waits another half hour, allowing drugs and alcohol to push her deeper into a coma before he rapes her. When he calls the ambulance to rescue her, it is almost an afterthought.

Roeg's camera and editing control the reenactment of the rape, cutting between Netusil's and Alex's perspectives and indicting them both. The first part of the rape is from Netusil's viewpoint. He stands over Milena's bed. The camera cuts to a shot of Alex lifting Milena onto the bed; he plays the Moroccan music on the record player which becomes louder and louder. As the music builds, so does Alex's nervousness and anxiety. The camera cuts back to Netusil, ripping the sheets off Milena's bed, and showing them to Alex, as he accuses Alex of ravishment. Alex sits down in a close shot, his stomach rising and falling, his breath quickening. Now it is his viewpoint. The camera cuts to Alex sitting next to Milena lying on the bed. He takes out his penknife, and cuts off her camisole, then her bra, starting to stroke her stomach and breasts. He hesitates, and props his chin in his hand. The camera cuts back to Alex, whom Netusil continues to interrogate and accuse of ravishment. Their two heads come together for a tight two-shot. Netusil stares at Alex, touching his arm, and Alex looks at Netusil's

hand. The camera is merging them for a final consolidation of forces before the rape. The camera then cuts to the actual rape itself, which is repeated through several shots revealing many different angles of Alex raping Milena. The camera's repetition creates a powerful visual fury and tempo as if it were sexually aroused. The multiplicity of shots and the repeat of the assault allow the camera, Alex and Netusil to unleash their attack and reach their climax.

The sequences following the rape show a crucial shift in viewpoint. When Stefan brings the news that Milena will live, Alex smiles, saying, "You don't need me anymore," implying his diminishing role in the events to follow. His flashbacks no longer dominate the film's images. Instead, Netusil assumes the primary role as the co-conspirator with Roeg's camera, as both resume their obsession with Milena as the object of their voyeuristic fantasies. Netusil stands in front of his bathroom sink, staring at himself in the mirror. The camera cuts to a shot of New York City as if seen through a fish-eye lens, suggesting the eye of the camera and a new and different collaborative perspective. Alex walks out of a hotel, and Milena gets out of a cab which Alex climbs into. Recognizing her, he calls to her, and she turns, staring straight ahead. As the cab drives away, Alex looks helplessly out the back window. As in Netusil's fantasies, Alex looks foolish, for Milena does not answer him and only stares coldly at him. The scar on her neck evokes the vampiric quest by Alex and Roeg's camera. But Milena is transformed, she is boyish, with short hair, "neutralized" as Alex was in Netusil's fantasy. The implications are that Netusil is creating a new fantasy, but Milena is different, less vibrant and perhaps less of a threat to her assailants. Indeed, Milena's defiant stare into the camera might be interpreted to mean that she can resist Netusil's will to manipulate her behavior, for she proved her resilience by living through the former assault. But there is the possibility that she has less will power because of Netusil's power to transform her. We remember Netusil's words, "They challenge our will to master reality," which implied that women like Milena challenged his and Alex's desire to control reality. But now in the final sequence Netusil reasserts his will through his fantasies by controlling the point of view of Roeg's camera and by holding a privileged place in the narrative.

In *Bad Timing*, as in his past films, Roeg chooses point of view for his primary area of experimentation. But whereas audiences were previously led to believe, perhaps a trifle optimistically, that they could expand their perception through imaginative identification with a vibrant, magical character (who formerly was always male), here they are compelled to face their own complicity with the forces that destroy or at least diminish this romantic victim.

—SUSAN BARBER

DAMNATION ALLEY

(Or, How I Learned to Start Worrying, Even if the Film Was a Bomb)

Jack Smight's *Damnation Alley*, loosely based on Roger Zelazny's science-fiction novel of the same name, passes for good, clean, American adventure, a futuristic Wild West as seemingly ingenuous as most Westerns. Not designed to convince an intellectual audience that the issue of nuclear war is being adequately treated, it has none of the acid, ironic humor of Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, or the black silliness of Lester's *The Bedsitting Room*. It is precisely this unabashedly excited approach to post-atomic-war adventure which makes *Damnation Alley*, otherwise hardly worth the time it takes to get angry, a film to be reckoned with. For in aiming for mainstream acceptance, the science-fiction film genre shies away from those politically dangerous visions and judgments which typify the cult literature, opening the genre not only to a wider but a wider-eyed audience. I saw the film in a London working-class-neighborhood theater. And whatever box-office success *Damnation Alley* has achieved can be attributed to its appeal to gullible young space travelers—such as those who in their squirmy enthusiasm awaited with me, that wintry Saturday afternoon, a villains-and-varmints cross-country foray through the deserts of America—after The Bomb.

But *Damnation Alley* is not just a teaching film for children. Smight employs some brilliantly conceived and executed color effects to encourage us to stop worrying and love the bomb—if only for the fantastic visual experience it might provide! With the added assurance (in case you were still worried) that a few time-tested American traditions—sexism, racism, trendy anti-establishmentism—can survive even a nuclear holocaust which leaves the earth tilted on its axis and in a state of physical chaos.

There is method to this denial of madness, for it would be naive of film-makers today to fail to allow for a certain political sophistication among their mainstream audience. The film raises a number of contemporary issues, but with such a confusion of intent as to effectively mask any causal connection between present societal assumptions and future nuclear tragedy. In a process of imbibe and conquer, *Damnation Alley* turns

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what was an unspeakable horror into a household word, easily spoken because already confronted, already digested. Smight exposes a dangerously stringent militarism, but counters it with a couple of hip deserters; admits to an obvious sexism, but gives it a wink and a nudge; shows the nuclear explosions in living color, but leaves out any burning bodies; describes an atmospheric hell, but makes it thrillingly trippy; and creates from the desolation a challenge for pioneers of the future who refuse to mourn, refuse to regret, but only carry on courageously.

The film dispenses painlessly with the political fact of World War III, clouding it in an incomprehensible and boring opening sequence of coded interchanges between expressionless military officials in an American bomb-control site. The young audience gets pretty restless at all this. By the time the series of orange explosions burst onto the screen, it seems to affect these London children as just so much color. This is the way the world ends . . . pass the popcorn. We adults, on the other hand, have been treated to a guilt-free light and color show of captivating proportions!

Our heroes have names and faces, but even with a scorecard it would be difficult to tell the players in this drama. Each character embodies some timely political stance, but by way of not distracting us with the facts, Smight confuses and thus obscures any connection we might make between this stance and events of a political nature, a nuclear war for example.

Tanner (Jan Michael Vincent): In Zelazny's novel, Tanner is the principal character, a Hell's Angel who has always seen the world through "crap-covered glasses," so fallout is nothing new to him. In the film, Tanner is somewhat less central, and Smight modifies and mollifies his rebelliousness to a timely suggestion of a politically aware, alternative lifestyle, straddling that fence on which to be slightly unAmerican is to be very American indeed. Having quit the military after the war, Tanner lives, with his buddy Keegan, in a house painted in bright designs which we immediately recognize as a code for an anti-establishment, anti-war, pro-love lifestyle. But his "alternative" is motivated less by a vision (crap-colored or otherwise) than by a desire to have a good time, holocaust or no. Like an escapee from some surfer film, with a will to adventure no more dangerous than a boy scout's, a passion for motorcycles more restless than rebellious, and a hip-cool anti-militarism aimed not at the war or its effects but at his commanding officer, Denton (the figure of authority), Tanner is an older-brother figure in a film aimed at an adolescent audience. That he seems not to have noticed that there has been a war, except that the playground looks a little different, only continues the obscuring devices of the film's first sequence. Ultimately nothing more than a hip figurehead, Tanner is utilized in the film not to raise politically challenging questions but to further cloud them.

Denton (George Peppard): Is he a duty-bound US hawk, driven to serve his country to the end (and beyond), clinging to his last vestiges of military authority, who might rather be kicking back swapping stories of him and the boys back in W.W.III (if only there were someone left to swap stories *with*); is his analysis of the death of one of his men ("It doesn't mean it's anybody's fault; it means Perry's dead") a mark of callous, manly insensitivity, even nihilism? Or is Denton the only one with enough realistic strength to face the situation, caring enough to seek out the possibility of other human beings across the country, a fatherly leader who has the good sense to put his own needs aside in these trying times and guide his flock to greener pastures? Or all of these?

Keegan (Paul Winfield): He's black, he looks good, he's cool. He has at least noticed that everything worth living for ("people alive . . . singing . . . making love") has perished in political stupidity and chaos, but his moaning falls on deaf ears. Nobody knows the troubles he's seen. Half way through the film, Keegan fights a gallant but losing battle against a posse of giant cockroaches, and is eaten alive in the back seat of an abandoned car. An earlier shot of a family of skeletons licked clean by bugs in another car not only foreshadows Keegan's death, but his immediate and complete disappearance. There may have been room for Keegan in the tank, but not in the film, and not a mention is made of him, even in memoriam, as the others drive off. For what was (more or less) a lost tribe of leftovers from the melting pot is fast becoming a Caucasian family circle: Denton as father (or grandfather); Tanner and Janice, a woman they pick up along the way, as the young couple; and Billy, an orphan they adopt after Keegan's death, as their child. So Keegan gets eaten right out of the picture, and no one seems to care. Should we?

Janice (Dominique Sanda): The question of woman's place, postwar style, is answered early in the film, in a cruel joke played by Tanner, who pushes a female dummy (taken by both Keegan

DAMNATION ALLEY

and the audience to be a real woman) off the back of his motorcycle to be eaten "alive" by gigantic, scaly insects crawling over the sands in predatory determination. The two men have a good yuk over it all, which only intensifies the blatant objectification of women, a kind of careless horniness with violent edges, which permeates this film to a bizarre degree. (The explosion which wipes out the military base is itself caused by the lit cigarette of a soldier who becomes mesmerized while looking at *Playboy* foldouts. The camera focuses on the paper dolls burning, burning, BOOM!)

When Janice makes her first appearance, alone on the terrace of what the men thought was a deserted casino in a deserted Las Vegas, she displays the kind of grateful disbelief at finding other human beings in her midst which one might expect, given the situation. No dummy, she. But Tanner and Keegan can focus only on their incredible luck: what a dazzling specimen of female beauty! We don't need to see their eyes popping and tongues extended to be reminded of the predatory creatures in the earlier scene. Presented initially as a uniquely philosophical and courageous woman, who has managed to stay alive when all around her have perished (either from radiation or despair), Janice is immediately robbed (or disrobed) of her humanness, which registers second if at all to her femaleness in the eyes of the men. This is admitted casually, honestly, and playfully, encouraging us to accept if not adopt this stance as well. Janice defends herself with fetchingly ambiguous eye-rolls which only lead us to wonder, what *is* going on in that pretty little head?

Probably nothing more or less than is going on in this film. There's safety in ambiguity, after all, even if (or, perhaps, especially if) the earth is dangerously a-tilt. The world as we know it is dead; it doesn't mean it's anybody's fault, it just means it's dead. The written explanation which appears on the screen after the bomb blasts places these few survivors in a menacing, alien new world, setting out in a struggle for "survival and dominance." But if we assume the dominance to be over the wild atmospheric conditions and radiation-engendered, creepy-crawly creatures, we soon learn that the struggle is more complex than that, pitting man against man, and woman. The dummy scene is one twist on that theme. The more subtle takeover of Janice is another. A third is the male competition and mutual dislike between Denton and Tanner, which is present from the start, giving way periodically to the stronger threat from the outside, but reemerging whenever possible. The loud silence about Keegan's death is yet another. Finally, there is the very obvious statement that insects are not the only dangerous critters out there, when several mountain men emerge from hiding in their café, not as men, exactly, but as human threats. And who throws the first stone? Billy, to cheers and whistles in the cinema. Competition rules okay.

The possibility of a new sense of community in this struggle surfaces, but is continually frustrated by the persistence of old priorities. Certainly this group suggests a community of adults who recognize the need for a kind of unity not previously experienced by any of them, and the whole impetus behind the journey is the search for other human beings, following only the slightest shred of evidence of their existence. But the pass-word is "don't look back," not to the war, and not to the man we just left behind. It's a blind courage, a refusal which sentences this crew to limp along, shackled by the trappings of the past, destined to trade any vision of a brave new world for the cowardly old one they know and are indifferent to. Our Hawksian team gets the job done, but only that.

There is an odd suggestion—odd in its subtlety in such a film—that what remains of the human race after the bomb retains only the skeleton of its humanity. A plastic dummy, stripped of its wig and clothes; a family of bare bones in the back seat of a car; Keegan's fate in the Martian desert that was once earth, are sinister reflections of those still alive but stripped of all caring, creative thinking, motivation to love. For our heroes are more mannequins than characters, mere shadows of human beings. This is a typical mode of characterization in a genre which tends to be less than optimistic about human nature, but what the literature utilizes thematically is presented so baldly and without regret in this film as to remain a darkly unclaimed prophecy.

For all the seventies hip that *Damnation Alley* conjures up, it's little more than a bizarre twist on an old-fashioned family film. One has the sense that Walt Disney has come back to haunt us with his vision of Armageddon. Or possibly *Damnation Alley* is the ultimate shaggy dog story, taking us from the seventies to the end of the world and, before we can say "Jiminy Cricket," jettisoning us back into a decidedly presixties resolution. A sort of back-motion Western, it retreats not only from a Westernism gone berserk, but from any dangerous frontiers of consciousness. All those threatening possibilities of new roles, new challenges? Gone with the winds. For after a violent storm sets the earth right again, radio contact is made at last, and the good news is that the country can make a new, old start, back East where such things happen. With the chaos has disappeared all ambiguity of intent: the mood is appropriately puritanical. Denton, his arm around Janice, has settled into fatherliness, Janice into daughterly-motherly, grateful passivity. What was a divisive male competitiveness has softened into a boys-will-be-boys, generational conflict. It's *Ozzie and Harriet.* It's *The Donna Reed Show.* It's the post-nuclear nuclear family. As the boys ride grinning into town, they are met by a smiling crowd of model just-plain-folks. The town itself is

still green, still (or again?) fenced off into better homes and gardens. Anytown, USA, is dead; long live Anytown, USA.

Much has been said about the cinema's penchant for distorting the past, but the future, too, is open to "historical" distortion. Our heroes have made it to Damnation Alley and back again, and it wasn't so bad, it was even pretty entertaining. Perhaps children *can* be taught to love the bomb before they have even learned to worry, and issue-wise adults can still be effectively reassured that, in the end, everything's cool.

What, me worry? —JUDITH BLOCH

ESTHAPPAN

Director: Aravindan. Produced by General Pictures, Quilon. Screenplay: Aravindan, Kottukappaly and Kavalam. Camera: Shaji. Editing: Ramesh.

There is an etching of Rembrandt's in which Jesus is talking to a small circle of people. A few people look at Jesus while they listen, others look down. In the foreground, an old woman looks away from Jesus into space, remembering something almost forgotten, perhaps a far off memory of gentleness like the gentleness in Jesus's voice. In Rembrandt's etching, the external event (a man who talks sincerely, some market women and some passers-by) recedes before the immensity of the old woman's consciousness (her memories and longings, the fog of things she knows but does not know how to say). Rembrandt indicates the external event, but his interest lies in the inner lives people bear to that event, in the depth of space into which the old woman gazes.

Like Rembrandt's etchings, the films of the Indian director Aravindan guide the eye through the external event to the dreams and hopes people carry within themselves: along with the work of Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani, Aravindan's films constitute India's cinema of the inner life.

Esthappan, which played at the last San Francisco Film Festival, is the first film of Aravindan's to receive a festival screening in the US. The film represents the life of a fisherman —that is the external event—as it impinges on the lives of men and women who inhabit a poor coastal village in Kerala (south of Bombay). Some of the villagers go out to sea with their fishing nets, others sell fruit and tobacco; one man drives a truck, another keeps a toddy shop. A contractor in a Mercedes supervises the work of thin laborers as they construct an embankment of rocks. A priest in short trousers sings a hymn of healing for his parishioners.

The fisherman Esthappan (who is seen at the beginning of the film walking shoreward from the sea) crosses and re-crosses the lives of the villagers. There is something about him—his waywardness, or maybe the look in his eyes—which gives rise to stories. On walls and rocks he sketches charcoal images of the Holy Family and guardian angels. (The village is populated by an ancient community of Syrian Christians.) He has the habit of coming by when people can use help. The stories about Esthappan contradict one another: in one version, he cures the dying daughter of the truckdriver's mistress; in another, he goes through nervous and ineffectual motions of sweeping over the girl's body and runs away at the first opportunity. The rough people in the village think ill of him; the docile people think him supernatural. Aravindan's film runs alternate versions of an event as equally plausible accounts and our attention travels from the event to those notions by which people construe the world.

The viewer's interest in the sequence of "apparitions" (first one version of an event, then another) is maintained largely by the intensity of the apparitions themselves. As people talk about Esthappan they continue with their lives: the *bidi*-maker continues to snip tobacco leaves, the policeman talks between bites of a banana which he picks off a grocerwoman's display, the grocerwoman keeps up her cleaning of betel nuts behind the counter. We become absorbed in watching because the figures on the screen (all nonprofessional actors) are so engrossed. Nothing is so compelling as a person deeply attentive to some activity.

Shaji's camera registers soft contrasts of light, faint rubbings of gold in the dark hall of the village's Catholic church, the foggy blackness of a cave following upon the grain of sandstone walls, a haze of blue in fishnets hoisted above the water.

Towards the end of the film, Esthappan seems to disappear from the village. The camera searches for him among rocks and caves and then looks out to sea. A voice trained to shout across distances calls out E-s-t-h-a-p-p-a-n. No answer. News is brought to the village priest that Esthappan has vanished.

The villagers pursue the routine of their lives. They hear the priest preach to them about Christ's peace. Later that evening, they perform a religious play with noblemen in the costume of Europeans. On a wooden platform mounted with old spotlights, men in tinsel swords threaten one another. A king awakens

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ESTHAPPAN: *Children run with Esthappan to an accident on the beach.*

from sleep and embraces his brother. The audience disperses.

It is morning now. The camera turns in a slow circle from the palm grove in which the audience sat. A canopy of colored paper flutters above the stage. As the camera completes its circle, the sea shows up washing against the embankment of piled rock. A man lies sleeping on the rock, his legs drawn up, his arms under his head. The sleeping man is Esthappan.

During his visit to Berkeley in 1980, Aravindan described the structure of *Esthappan* as "a string of beads." I take the beads to be intense images (part reality, part projection) of the hope or fear in people. The string I take to be the consistency of Aravindan's point of view, the camera mild (not detective) and generally at mid-distance from interacting villagers. But Aravindan is not abstractly even-handed with alternate versions of Esthappan's activities. As we watch versions of several episodes, the impression accumulates that Esthappan is a good man, however eccentric his life might be. There is a small episode in the middle of the film which appears to be the clasp to

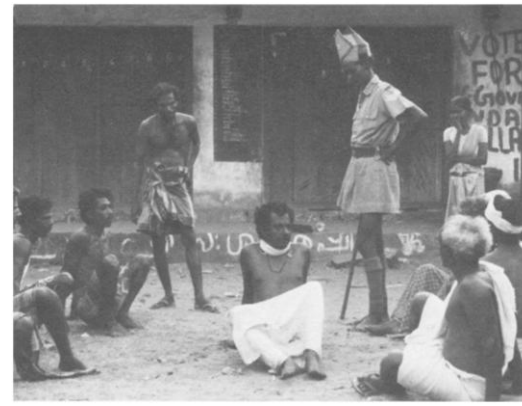
Aravindan's string of beads. Some shirtless boys come upon Esthappan sitting under his sketch of the Crucifixion. He seems to be in a trance. The children laugh. A boy goes up to him and pokes him without provoking a response. After a while, Esthappan comes to and looks at the boys with kindness in his eyes. The boys don't know what to do; they begin pelting Esthappan with stones. A look of pained surprise crosses Esthappan's face. Then he decides to play the boys' own game and tosses stones back at them. As the stones sail through the air they turn into sweetmeats. The children are delighted and scramble for what he tosses at them.

The look of pained surprise provides a clue to Esthappan's nature. It is reported to us in a young boy's version of how he came by the sweetmeats. The boy's mother scolds him for stealing again. The boy starts to explain and the screen shows us the episode I have just described. As far as the viewer can tell the children are innocent; they see without distortion. And what they observe is that Esthappan instead of reacting to the pelting with anger, *chooses* to act kindly, *chooses* to play a benevolent game.

This isolation of Esthappan's moment of choosing is more explicit than our experience of it in the film. In the film, the impression of Esthappan's goodness accumulates without our conscious knowledge, in spite of the contradictory versions. When the film ends, we leave without bewilderment. Our feeling is not that it is difficult to learn the truth about anything, but rather of having been near a gentle and uninsistent presence.

Aravindan is the son of Govinda Nair, a well known humorist in Malayali literature. After graduating from highschool in a small village in central Kerala, Aravindan went to Trivandrum, Kerala's capital, to study botany and zoology. In Trivandrum he became interested in films and saw the few foreign films which traveled down from Bombay. He recalls seeing *Rashomon, Bitter Rice, Bicycle Thief,* and some films from the United States—*Viva Zapata!, The Way of All Flesh* and *Gaslight.* He says he liked *Rashomon* particularly well and saw it many times. He and some friends started film societies in Trivandrum, Kottayam and Calicut, and talked frequently about making a fine film in their own language (Malayalam). One of these friends put up the $20,000 which enabled Aravindan to make *Uttaryanam* (Throne of Capricorn) in 1974.

Readers may recall that Satyajit Ray began



Esthappan (center), policeman, and villagers

making films much as Aravindan did, without benefit of formal schooling. Ray and Chidananda Das Gupta started the Calcutta Film Society in 1948, Ray watched Renoir at work on *The River,* he and some friends talked endlessly about the possibility of a new cinema in Bengali. The principal difference between Ray's enterprise in the fifties and Aravindan's in the seventies was that in the interim a national film school had been established in Poona, a small city near Bombay. Whereas Ray's cinematographer, Subrata Mitra, had never operated a movie camera before he began work on *Pather Panchali,* Aravindan's cinematographer Shaji had received three years of professional training at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) before he started working with Aravindan. I might add as an aside that the variety and skill of the new Indian cinema would be impossible without a pool of young, idealistic professionals who have graduated from the FTII over the last twenty years.

Aravindan shoots his films in four to six weeks; the economics of small budget production—*Esthappan* was made for $40,000—allow no longer than this. The actors and the crew rent a house in the area where Aravindan is to shoot. They live and eat together and everybody comprehends the constraints within which they work. When a shoot is over, crew and nonprofessional actors return to their workaday jobs. Aravindan himself returns to being Development Officer (overseeing research and publicity) for the Kerala Rubber Board.

Besides *Esthappan,* two other films by Aravindan are well-known to cineastes in India: *Thampu* (The Circus Tent, 1978) and *Kummatty* (The Bogeyman, 1979). *Thampu* is about a second-string circus which visits a riverside village in central Kerala. The style is documentary but there is a profound tension under-

lying the succession of events: the contrast between the bondage of the circus performers and the naive freedom of the village audience. Members of the circus troupe were sold to the owner like Gelsomina in *La Strada* or hired for a pittance. They go through their acts like somnambulists while the villagers gape at them with fresh admiration. Two weeks after the circus opens, a local factory owner announces a religious festival. The villagers all flock to the new entertainment and leave the circus benches empty.

Kummatty is about a bogeyman from Kerala myths who appears one day on a path leading down to the village. He carries a pole hung with animal masks and sings nonsense verses as he walks:

> In the beginning of the beginning of the beginning
> Da-di-dil-du di-da-dil

Whoever else he may be, Kummatty is also a warm old man with the kindest eyes. The children overcome their fear of him and begin to follow him around. They invent dances to go with his song and every now and then shriek out his name in delight, "Kummatty! Kummatty!"

At harvest time, Kummatty prepares to leave the village but the children will not part from him. To humor them, he transforms them into animals and back again into humans. Unfortunately, a boy turned dog strays away before Kummatty's magic trick is over. For a year the dog lives with his parents, who fully recognize him to be their son. They feed him rice and lentils and lay him to sleep next to his sister. Along with the rains the following year, Kummatty returns and restores the boy to his human form. The boy runs home to his pet parrot and releases the bird to join other birds wheeling freely in the sky.

A viewer who sees *Thampu, Kummatty* and *Esthappan* together will discover in the films similarity of both themes and treatment. Aravindan is particularly interested in figures at the margin of society: nomadic circus performers, a half-real bogeyman, an ordinary/extraordinary fisherman. All these figures suggest edges of experience which we deny in our daylight lives. His style is to compose with long takes, whose length is rendered unobtrusive by music with long periods. He favors mid-length shots which locate human beings in their environment: in *Kummatty* he returns frequently to dancing children seen across a slip of water or on the saddle of a hill, creatures in the grass. The undramatic manner of his films raises the question of coherence.

In his review of new directions in Indian cinema for *Film Quarterly* (Fall 1980), Chidananda Das Gupta refers to Aravindan's *Thampu* in the following terms: "Wordless observation is also the forte of G. Aravindan's *Thampu* . . . but by pushing realism to its logical, unstructured conclusion, the director makes his fascinating style somewhat untenable for a full-length feature." (p. 40) The question of formal coherence is always difficult to resolve. I can adduce for *Thampu* as well as for *Kummatty* and *Esthappan* patterns which sustain them and which are completed as the film ends, so that I experience closure. But what I find most interesting about Aravindan's films is the faith by which they are animated. Aravindan seems to believe that if we shed our fear and look at other people respectfully and sympathetically, the inner life of other people will disclose itself. The opaqueness is not in other people, but in our way of seeing.

It is a strange belief for a practitioner of cinema, a medium which excels in detecting what other people are trying to hide. Out of that belief comes the restraint of Aravindan's films and, I think, their great secret power.

—SATTI KHANNA

THE MOTH

(Cma) Director: Tomasz Zygadło. Script: Janusz Sosnowski. Photography: Jacek Zygadło. Music: Jan Kanty Pawluskiewicz. Film Polski.

Gdańsk, despite being largely an industrial city, is a leading center of innovation in Polish culture as well as in politics. When an all-night radio call-in program was started there not long ago, it proved enormously popular. In a society where official good cheer has been all but obligatory, and particular difficult situations have usually had to be discussed through a screen of generalities, the opportunity to talk "in public" about intimate, painful problems was evidently very welcome.

The Moth capitalizes skillfully on these pressures as it traces the breakdown of a broadcaster responsible for a "Radio SOS" program. It also seemed to me the most visually striking film in the recent Gdańsk festival, which collected the past year's output of Polish features for the inspection of fellow film-makers, officials, and critics from Poland and a considerable number of Eastern European, Asian, and Western countries.

Shot in harsh black-and-white, *The Moth* is as hard on its characters as Avedon, or Allen's *Stardust Memories*. In the shadowy glassed-off world of the broadcasting studio, where isolation is the technical and human name of the game, the camera prowls around announcer Jan and his microphone—his magic link to the personal agonies of

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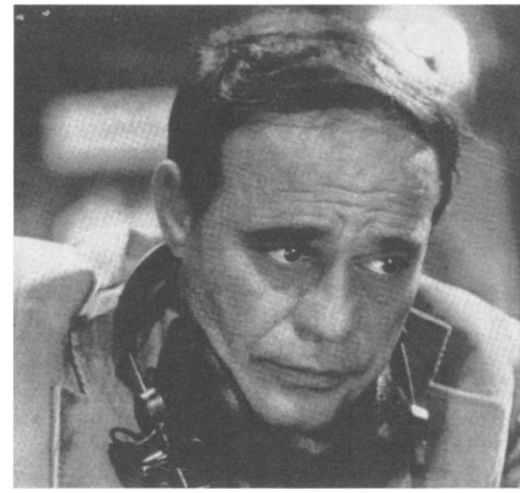
the sleepless, the depressed, the suicidal, the lost souls out there in the even deeper dark. Played by a well-known stage actor named Roman Wilhelmi, a sort of stockier Richard Harris, Jan has a wonderfully confidential tone of voice. In responding to the desperation of his callers, Jan confesses his own perplexities and failures. And by that peculiar direct contact between listeners and radio personalities, he has inadvertently built up a sort of therapy service. But of course it begins to drive him mad: the intense pressure of need from his listeners, the responsibility of giving advice on slender bases of fact, his night-time hours which preclude normal daily life (or even regular sleep). . . . He realizes that he can't even make sense of some kind of spat which takes place, beyond the soundproofing glass, between an engineer and his studio girlfriend. (The last engineer, we learn, went crazy on the job.)

The camera follows Jan out of this isolation as dawn comes, and we're led to the apartment of his estranged wife. Gradually we discover that Jan's life is indeed at least as much of a mess as that of any of his listeners. His teenage son by a previous marriage lives in his wife's apartment; neglected in favor of Jan's mistress, she turns her sexual energy toward the son—who, however, finds a lover of his own age. We follow Jan to the apartment of the mistress, where things are going downhill also. Heretofore, the film has utilized a closely worked shot/counter-shot style, confining the viewer firmly within Jan's increasingly tormented point of view. Now, gradually, the camera liberates itself and identifies with persons in Jan's periphery. It follows the wife on a visit to confront the mistress; they drink a great deal of vodka together, and become friends. Jan collapses at last, becoming incoherent on the air and playing the studio piano endlessly until they carry him away: all this is filmed in a vertiginous, circling style and performed very effectively by Wilhelmi (who received best-actor prize for the role). Jan returns from the sanitarium calmed and smiling benignly as wife, mistress, son, engineer, engineer's lover, and producer friend all visit him for an *al fresco* meal in the sunshine around a big circular table—a distinctly Fellinian ending.

To Polish critics at the festival, *The Moth* was a "last year's film—too personal." Under the impact of the stunning strikes and ensuing political events in Gdańsk and other Polish industrial cities, Poles are eager for films that confront big political issues: resistance to oppressive government authority, censorship, wages and hours, the role of the new autonomous unions, corruption. But *The Moth*, in my opinion, confronts in its own stylish way a problem that is as severe in Poland as in any atomized, alienated industrial society, and worsening: given the decline of family and romantic bonds, how can people deal with their solitary confusion and pain? As Jan's own confusion grows, he goes to see a psychiatrist, who counsels stoic endurance—and offers to be a guest on the program. However, when confronted by the raw needs and direct human challenges of the listeners, the psychiatrist can only talk useless jargon, and the listeners begin to ask Jan to "get rid of that guy, so we can talk." In dramatizing so powerfully the loneliness, the lostness of contemporary city life, *The Moth* contributes as much as any film about shady dealings among the new middle-class and professional ranks. Its sense of deep personal despair is unfashionable; it doesn't even offer the hero a chance for the great desperate romance which seems to be so devoutly sought by many Poles. Its literally black picture of life, utterly unromantic, gives no real grounds for hope; but people go on, enjoying the sun if it happens to shine.



Roman Wilhelmi in Zygadlo's THE MOTH

It is worth noticing that radio has a confessional quality denied to television (and to film, except in rare cases like Stanton Kaye's *Georg*). Radio's very abstraction from visual cues seems to heighten its emotional impact, and radio personalities often generate bonds with their fans of greater intensity than our more genial, relaxed attachments to TV figures. *The Moth* derives much of its power from its conjunction of the disembodied yet anguished emotion pouring in on its hero and his visible personal reality which is manifestly not able to bear the onslaught; and the film is thus a reminder of the too seldom acknowledged stylistic importance of the sound track.

Zygadlo, who began as a sociologist, seems to me to be, along with Krsyzstof Kiesłowski who directed *Amator* (*Camera Buff*), the most promising of the youngest wave of Polish directors. He previously directed two features, *The Ugly Duckling* (1974—for TV) and *Riddle* (1977), as well as the usual quota of documentaries, TV programs, and plays. He seems to have a sensibility which, like that of Zanussi, is distinctively contemporary; I look forward to his next project.

—ERNEST CALLENBACH

Controversy & Correspondence

AGAINST FALSE DISTINCTIONS

During the past few years the most frequently debated issue concerning what has come to be called avant-garde film has been the significance of "structural" or "formal" film-making: the body of work represented in North American by such film-makers as Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, Ernie Gehr, Tony Conrad, George Landow, Larry Gottheim, J. J. Murphy, and James Benning. While there is some recognition of the accomplishments of their work, I continue to hear widespread feeling that these film-makers are of only limited interest because their films are primarily concerned with reflecting on film itself—art for art's sake—rather than with using the medium to explore and illuminate Reality. Conversely, many of those who defend "formal" film-making attack the commercial narrative cinema because they assume audiences are giving themselves over to "illusions"—that audiences for popular film accept the action on the screen as though it were reality. The formal cinema, it is argued, is an antidote to such an attitude: by consistently bringing viewers face to face with filmic processes and materials, formalists remind us that all film is an illusion; whether or not a film provides entertainment is less important than increased intellectual, aesthetic and political awareness.

These attitudes are based on a similar misreading of crucial aspects of the film experience. They reflect the kind of restricted seeing which is probably inevitable when one important flowering of an art form refuses—for whatever reason—to recognize another. In reality, the commercial narrative cinema is far more self-reflexive and "formal" than is usually recognized; and on the other hand, most interesting "structural" or "formal" independent films are as fully about the Real World as any other films are.

There is little question but that much of the audience for the commercial narrative cinema is interested primarily in entertainment and that the majority of the films produced for this audience are so lifeless that they evaporate as soon as one leaves the theater; and most of us would agree that this is a sad situation. Nevertheless, to assume that the audience is unclear as to the illusory nature of the experience or that commercial films merely supply a substitute reality is to overlook the obvious.* When people go to see *Jaws, The Empire Strikes Back,* or *Halloween,* they are not going because they think they'll see a real man-eating shark, real space battles, or real murders; they are going to see if the film establishment can make an illusion momentarily credible. In this sense, most commercial film is implicitly self-reflexive: we may go to be fooled, but the moment we are fooled, we're immediately conscious that the director/actors/technicians have successfully done their jobs. The experience of even the most gripping film is basically the same as the magician's sawing the lady in half: we only enjoy the illusion as long as we know it's not true, or, to put it another way, as long as we're aware of both the illusion and its context in reality. If we really believed that Jaws was eating children, we'd stay away from the theater or go in a radically different frame of mind.

Commercial narratives are self-reflexive in other senses as well. For example, when we go to *Halloween* we bring with us—and usually quite consciously—an entire history of horror films and suspense thrillers. We need not have seen all the seminal works in the genre to be fully aware that when a character walks into a dark house, the director is manipulating us, developing our tension, leading us (to our pleasure and horror) down false paths in order to set us up for a surprise. Further, our awareness of such manipulation is a group phenomenon. At a horror film or a suspense-thriller we reveal—through our "uh-ohs," our silences, our screams, and our laughter—a common awareness that the experience shared in the theater is the product of a tradition we're a part of.

While it is true that the commercial cinema centers on character development and narrative, the assumption that this excludes a conscious awareness of formal concerns, either on the part of the director or the audience, is not substantiated by actual film-going. The slow track in on the jack-o'-lantern during the credits of *Halloween* is, I'm confident, generally recognized as a formal gesture during which the movement of the camera is "transferred" to the pumpkin, which seems to grow. Similarly, the "first person" camera movement around the house, in the back door, up the stairs and into the sister's bedroom is recognizable to most viewers both as an ingenious, expressive gesture which places us within the point of view of a "monster" *and as a camera movement,* too smooth to reflect real human motion, but gripping in and for itself. In *Dawn of the Dead* the grisly violence becomes funny to many members of the audience, not because we have been desensitized by the film, but for the opposite reason: we recognize the violence as a fiction and become fascinated and amused with the means and imagination involved in creating such real-looking gore. When we first see the Jake LaMotta character in *Raging Bull,* one of our first thoughts is, "Can that really be Robert DeNiro?"

And on the other hand, "formal film" is as "real-

*I must admit that, in at least one sense, the experience of commercial narrative may become a reality for the audience. Given enough exposure to the simplified ideological structures of most commercial films—their repeated patterns of problem/solution, right/wrong, good guys/bad guys—large segments of the audience may come to feel that these structures represent legitimate observations about reality. This is less a factor in individual viewing experiences, however, than a function of longterm conditioning. And, of course, mythic critics might argue for the value of such patterns as clues to the nature of contemporary culture.

istic" as commercial narrative is self-reflexive and formal. For one thing, linguistics tells us that the structure of a language determines to a considerable extent the ways in which the users of that language perceive the world. Film is one of our most influential visual language systems; and the ways in which it is and has been used have a good deal to do with what we are able to understand. Much of Hollis Frampton's work is able to stimulate awareness about the nature and effects of the various language systems we function within. *Surface Tension,* for instance, juxtaposes visual and auditory language systems in such a way that the values and limitations of each are put into relief.

Other "formal" film-makers take a different tack. Michael Snow, Larry Gottheim, J. J. Murphy, and Ernie Gehr, for example, explore the intersection of the film medium and reality. Snow's *Wavelength* is not simply a film about film; it's about the potential of film to modify space and restructure time. Our consciousness of the loft, the people who sometimes enter it, and the portions of Canal Street visible through the windows act as a standard against which we can measure film's immense potential for modification and distortion of the imagery it records. In *Horizons* Gottheim develops seasonal "rhyme schemes." In the winter section of the film, for example, groups of four shots, separated from one another by moments of red leader, are rhymed A, B, A, B. That is, in the first and third, and in the second and fourth shots certain visual elements are repeated—"rhymed." As viewers become aware of this unusual structure, they sensitize themselves both to the details of the physical landscapes Gottheim records and to various aspects of editing, camera movement, framing, light and color. When the film is over, active viewers have broadened their awareness of film structure and materials; *and* their sensitivity to the Upstate New York countryside has been invigorated. J. J. Murphy's *Print Generation* presents the results of filming and editing 60 one-second personal images; then making a contact print of this one-minute film; then contact printing that print, contact printing that print, and so on, for fifty print generations, which were arranged so that during the first half of the film we move "up" through the celluloid from the most to the least degenerated images, and then back again. The experience exposes the layered nature of color film emulsion and the effects of contact printing. And it reveals the ways in which the human eye and mind "read" visual patterns: as we move through the emulsion, the appearances of the one-second images continually change. Our attempts to guess what the finished images will be, and remember what they were, create a continual re-examination of the film and of our processes of perception and thought. In *Eureka* Ernie Gehr's use of turn-of-the-century footage photographed from the front of a San Francisco trolley car as it travels to the end of the line provides both a meditation on the history and materials of film *and* at least as revealing a sense of the life of that period, and some of the ways it differs from our own, as that provided by Coppola's laborious recreation in *Godfather II.*

Still other film-makers intensify the film-goer's sense of the nature and implications of the film-going experience itself. In *The Flicker* Tony Conrad puts viewers in intense contact with their own retinas and with some of the ways in which eyes and brain interact when stimulated by different rhythms of light and dark. What we learn has implications for both filmic and non-filmic contexts. In *Models: Reel 1* Taka Iimura reveals the effects of different densities of imagery on the viewer's sense of temporal duration. A 100-foot strip of film has a radically different impact when the strip is divided into frames (by Iimura's writing the numbers 1 to 24 over and over on consecutive frames), when it's divided into seconds (by Iimura's writing a numeral on every 24th frame), and when it's divided into minutes (one numeral each minute). *Models: Reel 1* relates to non-film experience, too: the more densely we pack our days, the more quickly they seem to pass. Anthony McCall's *Line Describing A Cone* brings the projection apparatus out into the theater (or into an alternative space) and by focusing attention on the cone of light between the projector and a wall (no screen is used) allows for an increased awareness of the implications of standard film projection; *and* it stimulates more active and intimate relationships among viewers. Getting to know McCall's film is, in large measure, interrelating with real people. When Carolee Schneemann synchronizes each consecutive pair of vertically arranged Super-8 images and the taped track for *Kitch's Last Meal* within the theater space itself, she is simultaneously insuring the formal integrity of her epic investigation of domestic interrelationships and she is continually reaffirming that sense of intimacy among viewers and film-maker which we usually identify with home movies. She creates a web of relationships *in the theater,* as she reveals the web of relationships captured in the film. Robert Huot's recent Super-8 diaries not only explore some of the formal possibilities of Super-8 sound film, they stimulate modifications in the lives of those people involved with the films. When the film-maker invited family and friends to a weekend "black and white party" in the summer of 1980, many participants were well aware that the experience would include screenings of previous diaries and the filming of footage for the 1980 diary: the party, it was clear, was an informal performance out of which the film would continue to grow.

I submit that any effective creation of a narrative "illusion" brings the active viewer consciously face to face with the nature of the film medium; and conversely, that any serious exploration of "film itself" involves the viewer with an important facet of "reality." Commercial narratives may tend to center on plot and character development and use the formal aspects of film imagery for contextualization and emphasis; formal films may tend to foreground duration, texture, color, rhythm, and composition, and use elements of character and narrative for contextualization and emphasis. But,

regardless of the specific ratio of formal and narrative elements in individual films, all film experiences involve—are "about"—an interaction between film art and reality. After all, every film either records or measures elements of reality, and all films are made and presented in real-life situations.

The hidden agenda of the negative attitudes about what I've been calling "formal film" and "commercial narrative" is, it seems to me, a function of the sheer size of the world of film. Both the areas I've been discussing (and, of course, there are many other areas) have produced so much interesting work that we find it increasingly difficult to keep up with either. Certainly one way for critics and teachers to relieve some of the pressure is to assume that this area or that isn't worthy of sustained consideration. Even to make the preceding argument, I've needed to choose terminology more reflective of an unthoughtful debate than of a careful examination of the many aspects of film history. To talk about "formal film" and "commercial narrative" as I do may tend to obscure the fact that there are many forms of narrative film (some of which are far less involved in commerical considerations than others) and multiple kinds of formal film (some of which would be commercial if the opportunity arose). Further, it is well to remember that the avant-garde cinema is not, by any means, confined to formalism. Some of the most interesting narrative films being made, for example, are produced independently for limited audiences: John Waters's *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living,* and Beth and Scott B's Super-8 films are cases in point. Conversely, commercial directors have made films in which formal concerns are at least as visible as narrative concerns: Herzog's *Fata Morgana* and Antonioni's *The Passenger,* for instance, greatly resemble Gottheim's *Horizons* and Benning's *11 X 14,* films usually considered seminal formal works.

We need to stop categorizing films on the basis of easy rhetoric and a desire to simplify film history. No doubt it's much easier to write books or teach courses on The History of Film, or to make pronouncements about "The 10 Best Films of the Year," when the number and variety of films involved is small. But, imagine a literary critic or a teacher of literature who wrote a book or taught a course called *A History of Literature,* and refused to include novels on the grounds that they created illusions which mindless readers accept as reality, or refused to include twentieth-century American poetry on the grounds that it was primarily concerned with literary art, rather than with real life concerns! We are still at the beginning of film history, but already the world of film has grown far beyond such over-generalizations. It's time we were seeing film critics and film teachers with enough honesty and humility to recognize that the art form they love is larger than they can contain, and with the stamina to help develop a climate where those interested in cinema can have the opportunity to investigate the most interesting and challenging examples of *all* kinds of films.

—SCOTT MacDONALD

Books

MOVING PLACES
A Life at the Movies

By Jonathan Rosenbaum. New York: Harper & Row, 1980. $11.95.

In science there is a still widespread pious myth that truth is found through dutiful application of the canons of induction. (Working scientists know better, of course, especially the best ones —living as they do by hunch and stubborn sifting of data for what might verify the hunch.) Its parallel in literary and film criticism is the pretense—which I am conniving in at this moment, and which other writers must connive in too if they want to be printed in sober magazines like *Film Quarterly*—that our reactions to and analyses of films are rational, cogent, coherent constructs in which personal backgrounds and emotions play a minor, neglible role. What Jonathan Rosenbaum does in this endearing if occasionally self-indulgent book is to undermine all that. He lets hang out all the usually suppressed personal side of our reactions to movies—the untidy sort of emotional stuff Pauline Kael once referred to as "slop"—in a book which, as far as I know, has no real predecessors. It is not criticism in any ordinary sense, though it contains many acute observations about individual films and about the medium in general. It is not autobiography either, though it contains much personal and family information. Perhaps it can best be described as a case history of how one person experienced movies over the course of his life—from little Jonny being taken to family-owned theaters by his father and grandfather, to Jon the Putney lad beginning to think about the relations between films and life, to Jonathan the critic, sojourner in foreign archives and contributor to film journals. It is also an account of film as "time-binder," to use old Count Korzybski's phrase; film as mummifier, to use Bazin's. The films in our lives are inevitably time machines for those who survive them (in all sense of that term). In his engaging account of his own life as it has intertwined with films, Rosenbaum has tried to understand and share his experience of this magical—and intimidating—aspect of the medium.

There is little attempt here to insinuate that film was important because it provided encounters with Great Works—though a number of these figure in the margins. The longest single part of the book recalls perceptions of and reactions to a Doris Day film called *On Moonlight Bay,* as seen on successive occasions widely

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separated in time. Rosenbaum's elaborate quotations of dialogue and business get a bit tedious occasionally; yet somehow just when impatience is reaching the page-skipping level, Rosenbaum brings us back with the personalness and the richness of his interactions with this film—despite of and because of its very tawdriness, its sexism, its appalling exemplification of the American culture that destroys us, yet has also made us. Seeing it over the years, the film might seem initially innocent, then (with the insights of feminism and radicalism) vile, and more recently, when overtaken by much more devious vileness, almost innocent again.

So over the book, as over *The Last Picture Show*, hangs a certain nostalgia—personal and social inextricably intermixed—for the days when movies were simply an ordinary part of life, and neither a subject of transcendent hype nor an endangered species clinging to shrinking urban habitats. Rosenbaum captures a sadness for American youth, dreams, the dark fields of the republic rolling on under the night. He's watching *On Moonlight Bay* yet again, this time on a rented TV in California.

> Somehow, at this moment, I realize I'm no longer watching a movie. I can't be, because movies in that sense don't exist any more. *On Moonlight Bay* was once like a family, a whole country watching slides of itself in a dark cozy parlor . . . What the movie was no longer exists: what it did is done. . . . Most people would say that film is undergoing a profound transformation. Maybe it is, but where do you draw the line between profound transformation and extinction?

Only the kids at *The Rocky Horror Show* reassure him that moviegoing can still sometimes be resurrected as a communal event, "making one proud, not embarrassed, to be sitting next to other people in the dark."

This is a socially concrete view of movie-going that is perhaps natural for someone who has been deeply involved with exhibition. Rosenbaum's family was a theater family, and one of the charms of the book is that, although the family had its share of troubles, he actually seems to like his relatives; he displays a relaxed sort of piety about the family which is rare in American writing. Much of the book is like *Marienbad* on paper—a shifting screen of memory traces, relationships, hopes, illusions later displaced by other illusions. But the family connection runs like a sturdy thread through it all, or perhaps an anchor.

Considering Rosenbaum's many, varied and valuable contributions as a critic—usually on the side of radical innovations—there is surprisingly little in this book to situate its text in its *Zeitgeist* (mostly quick allusions and asides, as to a familiar diary-reader). But then the *Zeitgeist* is a notoriously shy creature, and often invented by hasty journalists out of badly shredded evidence; no one can know it as well as we know actual theaters, films, family. Rosenbaum sticks close to these, to where his heart is, and more precisely to those moments when mind and body are not at odds, but correspond, "theoretically *and* kinetically," with the movements in film.

Moving Places joins a small and select company of books in which movie-going is taken seriously as a major element in the author's psychological (and occupational) life; but it is not merely a movie-freak book, in which movies annihilate and displace a personal life. To all of us who have spent large parts of our lives in darkened halls, it offers the confessions of a companion spirit.

In any piece of writing so dependent on nuance as this, some readers are bound to resist certain sections. I didn't like much a passage in which *Kane, Sunrise* and various other films are alluded to as people; this is an arch conceit that oversimplifies what the bulk of the book makes rich and subtle. I was tantalized by certain interjections about unexplained people who saw films the author also saw, but about whom we learn nothing else. I could have done with less cute play with dumb titles. But the book is an admirable achievement; it takes risks. In a time when cinema has come so much to mean machine-tooled money-producing gimmicks, it reminds us of how important films have been, and may remain.

—ERNEST CALLENBACH

THE CINEMATIC MUSE
Critical Studies in the History of French Cinema

By Allen Thiher. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1979.

Although this collection of interrelated essays at times nearly strangles on scholarly jargon, it still makes some useful contributions to an understanding of issues raised in and by the French cinema from the twenties to the present. The intense intellectuality that marks the older arts in France also carries over into French film—though in ways not always fully appreciated by American film-makers and critics. At its best, Thiher's book makes significant headway in this area by framing its detailed discussions of specific films against a closely defined sense of modern intellectual history.

Thiher weaves detailed discussions of an arsenal of artistic-isms—modernism, postmodernism, surrealism, orphism, existentialism, and absurdism—into his essays, but the book is structured around extended discussions of key films by major directors. More often than not,

separated in time. Rosenbaum's elaborate quotations of dialogue and business get a bit tedious occasionally; yet somehow just when impatience is reaching the page-skipping level, Rosenbaum brings us back with the personalness and the richness of his interactions with this film—despite of and because of its very tawdriness, its sexism, its appalling exemplification of the American culture that destroys us, yet has also made us. Seeing it over the years, the film might seem initially innocent, then (with the insights of feminism and radicalism) vile, and more recently, when overtaken by much more devious vileness, almost innocent again.

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Considering Rosenbaum's many, varied and valuable contributions as a critic—usually on the side of radical innovations—there is surprisingly little in this book to situate its text in its *Zeitgeist* (mostly quick allusions and asides, as to a familiar diary-reader). But then the *Zeitgeist* is a notoriously shy creature, and often invented by hasty journalists out of badly shredded evidence; no one can know it as well as we know actual theaters, films, family. Rosenbaum sticks close to these, to where his heart is, and more precisely to those moments when mind and body are not at odds, but correspond, "theoretically *and* kinetically," with the movements in film.

Moving Places joins a small and select company of books in which movie-going is taken seriously as a major element in the author's psychological (and occupational) life; but it is not merely a movie-freak book, in which movies annihilate and displace a personal life. To all of us who have spent large parts of our lives in darkened halls, it offers the confessions of a companion spirit.

In any piece of writing so dependent on nuance as this, some readers are bound to resist certain sections. I didn't like much a passage in which *Kane, Sunrise* and various other films are alluded to as people; this is an arch conceit that oversimplifies what the bulk of the book makes rich and subtle. I was tantalized by certain interjections about unexplained people who saw films the author also saw, but about whom we learn nothing else. I could have done with less cute play with dumb titles. But the book is an admirable achievement; it takes risks. In a time when cinema has come so much to mean machine-tooled money-producing gimmicks, it reminds us of how important films have been, and may remain.

—ERNEST CALLENBACH

THE CINEMATIC MUSE
Critical Studies in the History of French Cinema

By Allen Thiher. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1979.

Although this collection of interrelated essays at times nearly strangles on scholarly jargon, it still makes some useful contributions to an understanding of issues raised in and by the French cinema from the twenties to the present. The intense intellectuality that marks the older arts in France also carries over into French film—though in ways not always fully appreciated by American film-makers and critics. At its best, Thiher's book makes significant headway in this area by framing its detailed discussions of specific films against a closely defined sense of modern intellectual history.

Thiher weaves detailed discussions of an arsenal of artistic-isms—modernism, postmodernism, surrealism, orphism, existentialism, and absurdism—into his essays, but the book is structured around extended discussions of key films by major directors. More often than not,

Thiher limits himself to one director and one film per chapter. There are chapters on Luis Buñuel *(Un Chien Andalou)*, Man Ray *(L'Etoile de Mer)*, Jean Cocteau *(Blood of a Poet)*, René Clair *(Entr'acte* and *A Nous la Liberté)*, Jean Vigo *(Zero for Conduct)*, Jean Renoir (mostly *Grand Illusion* and *Rules of the Game*), Marcel Carné *(Le Jour se lève)*, Robert Bresson *(A Man Escaped)*, François Truffaut (his first three features), Alain Resnais and Alain Robbe-Grillet *(Last Year at Marienbad)*, and Jean-Luc Godard *(Alphaville* and *Two or Three Things I Know About Her)*, as well as an early chapter on "Avant-Garde Film" which discusses Marcel Herbier's *Feu Mattia Pascal* and Jean Epstein's *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Thiher's concepts of modernism, mimesis, surrealism, and art as ludic activity constitute major unifying threads for the book as a whole, but the author tends to shift ideological gears—and his critical vocabulary—to suit the intellectual context of the film under discussion.

The results are mixed, with even the best chapters troubled by an academic density that sometimes lapses into pedantic obscurity. But at least six chapters—those on *Un Chien Andalou*, *Blood of a Poet*, Renoir, Truffaut, *Marienbad*, and Godard—are stimulating, perceptive, and conceptually incisive in ways that vindicate Thiher's academic critical methods. The chapters on Vigo and Carné are less satisfactory overall; though still possessed of some of the virtues mentioned above, they tend to be rather routine. Only the chapters on Clair and Bresson flounder seriously: in both Thiher tends to marshall ideas mechanical fashion, with results that are too obvious (with Clair) or too pat (with Bresson). But, except in these last two cases, Thiher's essays tend to establish an illuminating sense of the intellectual contexts within which these films were conceived and in which they continue to function.

Formal concerns loom large. Thiher is especially attentive to the implications of formal and structural choices made by these directors. Thiher's essay on *Un Chien Andalou*, to take one especially good example, bears heavily and persuasively on the notion of a self-conscious destruction of mimetic conventions; other critics' attempts at "thematic" and psychoanalytic interpretations pale alongside Thiher's detailed recognition of the Buñuel/Dali *Dog* as an act of "surrealist terrorism," an ironic, "parodistic destruction" of "our naive acceptance that film has the capacity to order the world through some objective mode of mimesis." Character analysis still plays an important role in Thiher's discussions—particularly, of course, with the films that make greater concessions to realistic drama. But even then, the central insights are directed to the implications of structure and *mise en scène:* the surrealist dynamics of *Zero for Conduct;* the theatrical metaphors of *Grand Illusion* and *Rules of the Game;* the absurdist disorientations of Truffaut's early features.

An important element of the book revolves around two large concepts: modernism and postmodernism. Thiher defines the former as a "theologico-aesthetic" phenomenon which seeks "to use art to find privileged modes of revelation that can offer access to an ontologically superior realm that transcends time and history." Thiher's modernist is "cursed by a sense of his fall into time and is possessed by a nostalgia for the plenitude of a present that can only exist as time past." As the crushing force of history and time increasingly denies access to that "ontologically superior realm," the modernist turns to forms which are symptomatic of impasse and paradox: in Renoir, "theatrical modes of mimesis are offered as the only viable means of representation of society, while the values that underlie these modes are designated as inadequate or destructive"; in Carné "we find a classical form that is in the service of a radical ideology, a tragic despair that is grounded in utopian poetics." Pushed to an extreme, this position of dynamic irresolution becomes the postmodernism of Resnais, Robbe-Grillet, and Godard: an inversion of the modernist's theologico-aesthetic faith and a marked shift toward "self-designating" acknowledgement of art "as a ludic construct."

Thiher's interest in "ludic constructs" and the sheer density of his essays on *Marienbad*, *Alphaville*, and *Two or Three Things* provide a strong indication that the issues of postmodernism engage him more fully than any of the others. It seems no accident that among the pre-New Wave films, it is the most radically self-conscious *(Un Chien Andalou* and *Blood of a Poet)* that provoke his most stimulating insights. The *Marienbad* chapter ("Narration of Narration") is an especially fine meditation on a variety of postmodernist issues: narrative and time, the uncertainty principle, the "ideology of play," the creation of "a work of metanarration that can account for its own unfolding." The Godard chapter rehearses many of that director's themes while also focusing on pop art and the "mythification of myth" *(Alphaville)* and "the impossibility of finding the discourse, the exact organization of images and language, that will reveal the essence of even the most banal . . .

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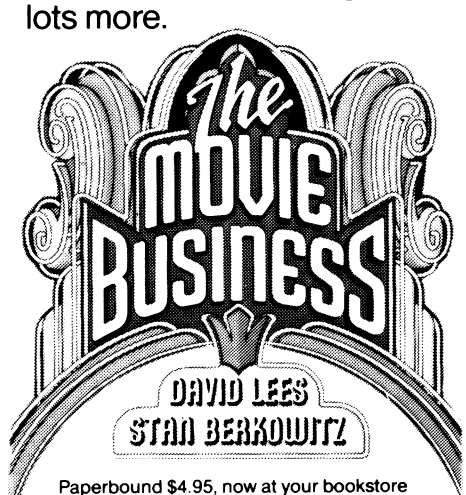

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daily experiences" *(Two or Three Things)*. Thiher, however, is most at home, not with these contemporaries, but with the Cocteau of *Blood of a Poet:* there, with Mallarmé as a key reference point, the author succeeds in revealing an orphic, antimimetic modernism coexisting with the skeptical self-consciousness that marks the postmodernists. This chapter just may be the best thing ever written in English on *Blood of a Poet*.

There is, unfortunately, much that detracts from the book's overall quality. There is sometimes a rather fuzzy relationship between supporting evidence and some of Thiher's abstract, jargon-clotted assertions. Moreover, he tends to use some words too much ("ludic") or a bit too presumptuously (mainly "thus"). On the larger issues, his sense of existentialism—ostensibly central to the chapters on Truffaut and Bresson—isn't nearly as well-defined and -handled as his sense of surrealism. Along the way, his generalizations about film stereotypes and genres tend to be unconvincing.

—PETER HOGUE

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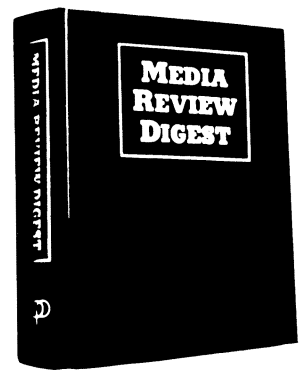

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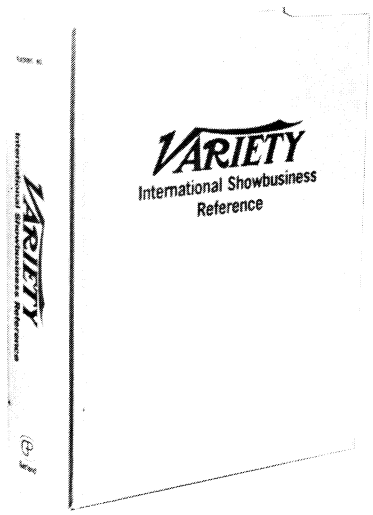

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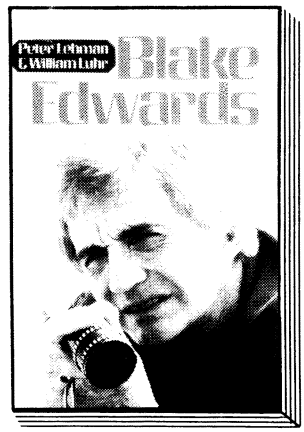

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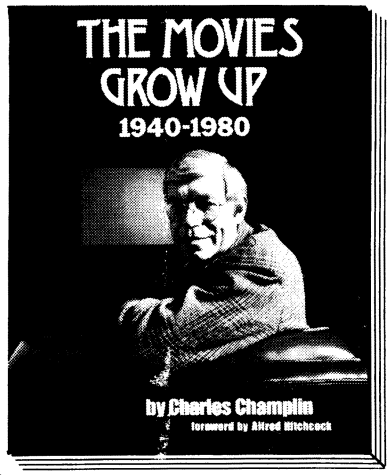

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